

A MOTHER'S REFLECTIONS

by Mary Beth Johnson

There are times in life I like to call 'mental snapshot moments.' Those times when I tell myself, "Hey, this is really important, and I want to remember it forever." June 27, 1968-- San Diego, California-- Mercy Hospital was one of those moments. I had just fed my new baby boy, Michael Washburn Johnson, and the nurse was taking him back to the nursery. It was his first full day on the "outside" having arrived at 5:25 p.m. the previous evening. As he was leaving my room, he looked at me, and I swear to God he smiled right into my face, and said "Look at me, Mom! I'm here. Is this great or what!" And that's how it always was with Mike and me. We often could communicate without a word. Of course sometimes he described my communication with him as giving him 'the eye' or flashing him my 'school marm look.' But still, words weren't needed.

When Mike was about 16-months old his Dad and I moved back to Omaha, our hometown. And three months later Mike's new little brother, Stephen Patrick, arrived to displace the reigning prince of the family. Only those of us who are the first born—and the first grandchild—can relate to that unique brand of specialness. It's a bit like being the first kid in class with the absolute latest and greatest *thingy* and everyone—even the popular kids who usually don't talk to us—want to be our friend. We walk with a sense of entitlement that is something new for us and makes us very tall as we give a generous smile to even the 'little people' who don't have this latest and greatest *thingy*. But, all too soon the next kid in class gets this *thingy* too, and it's even a little bit bigger and better than ours. And what happens—our life returns to being that kid in the back row with the funny haircut. That's sort of how it is when the next brother/sister comes into the picture and Grams and Papa now have two little princes or princesses.

Soon after Steve arrived on February 8, 1970, the four of us moved to Cumming Street in Omaha. Living on that street during those years was how I imagine turn of the century, small town living. Everybody knew everybody. All the kids were everybody's kids. All the yards were open fields of play *EXCEPT* for the Stykes's, of course. Everybody went to the same school after kindergarten, and everybody (almost) went to the same church. All the parents were friends. And every kid had someone or "someones" their age and gender to play with—except Whiz (Liz, the last of seven Kieney's and the *ONLY* girl) who was Steve's best friend. On Saturday nights, especially in the summertime, it was entirely possible that the two children in the beds upstairs weren't Mike and Steve. Mike was at the Fogarty's and Steve was at the Kieney's. We had someone else's two upstairs, and we Cumming-ites knew that everyone was safe and exactly where they were supposed to be. And so it went until the fall of 1978.

That fall the boys' father and I divorced. Mike, Steve and I moved to Atlanta. Aside from the obvious, things changed for all of us. While Mike continued to do well in school and enjoyed the company of friends and the positive regard of his teachers, he missed his home. He missed his friends, He missed his family, and he missed his father. The boys would visit their Dad in Omaha every summer, but because of our divorce their Dad was not comfortable spending a lot of time with my side of the family. So, Mike

was in essences divorced from them as well. It wasn't until later in life that Mike felt the same closeness he enjoyed as a young child with my side of the family.

Junior high passed in Atlanta without incident. Mike played Pop Warner football, and some baseball which he hated! He was the smallest kid on the baseball team. So when the team needed a walk they put Mike in. No one could pitch to him because he was so small. He was mortified! But In his sophomore year in high school, he played on the JV football team. He had recovered from his baseball humiliations, and was actually a better than average player. He felt he belonged, and that he was one-of-the-guys. But being one of the guys had a price which Mike would continue to pay literally until the day he died.

This is when he began to experiment with alcohol—an experiment that would lead him in the opposite direction of his dreams, derail him time and time again from his goals, and in the end take everything from him except the love of his family and friends.

Mike had troubles as a result of alcohol from the very start. In high school he wrecked a car and got his first DUI. As a senior he went on Spring Break to Florida and came home on crutches after tearing the ligaments in his knee as a result of “one of those nights.”. The problems escalated in severity until he was very seriously injured in a car crash he caused while driving under the influence, and was on a ventilator for days. In that same accident he injured two other people, a consequence which he deeply regretted. He went bankrupt. He went to jail. He lost jobs. He lost money. He lost relationships. He lost his freedom. He lost his health. He knew humiliation and hopelessness.

But there is more to Mike's story. He also knew recovery. During his lifetime he was a consumer of recovery services from intensive out-patient programs to a two year residential therapeutic community program. After treatment he was sober, attending Alcoholics Anonymous meetings and “doing the deal” as he would say for periods of four years, two years, one year, and many six-five-four-three month stints.

And when he was sober he could see how he could reclaim his life. He had a sense of hopefulness which replaced his alcoholic hopelessness. He courageously took steps that others advised him to take while assuring him that if he did, things would get better. And they did. He graduated from Metropolitan Community College with almost a straight A average, and was a member of the scholastic honorary. He was a reliable employee, and was regularly promoted. He enjoyed his friends and his family, and had A-1 credit. He also was one of those buff gym guys who have muscles on muscles. He and his buddy, Kevin, were frequent competitors/comrades/coaches for each other during their Swinney Gym nights which were sacred! “For God's sake, Mom, don't break your hip on gym night,” he would jokingly say—but I never really trusted that he was joking.

He enthusiastically completed a certificate program at NYU in property management—a direction he hoped to steer his career. He loved New York and he especially loved the history and the architecture of the city. One day after seeing the “guts” of the Chrysler Building he called me. If someone had entered the conversation late, they would have been surprised to find that he was talking about a building and not a woman he was lusting after. Friends who knew him after he moved to New York City described him as a guy who was there for them. They told me about one of the members of his AA group who was

having problems at work. She was newly sober and working as a bartender. One night she looked up and at the end of the bar sat Mike and his buddy, Andrew. They stayed drinking cokes until she assured them that she was doing OK.

Ninety-nine percent of the people Mike knew—he liked. Yes, I am his mother, but I think it's true that probably 90 percent of the people who knew Mike liked *him*. He was smart, funny, interesting to talk to, loved a good story, could tell a good story. He was a hard worker, inventive, able to solve problems and research solutions.

But he also liked his share and more of the best piece of meat on the table. He used ALL of the hot water most of the time without apology. He had his stuff in a certain place, folded exactly this way—not that way, wanted to do his own wash (even when it was one pair of jeans and two pairs of skivvies) because no one else could do it to his exacting specifications. His car was his castle. Don't mess with it. Don't drive it. Do NOT mess it up inside.

So my boy was a pretty regular guy. Not all good, but definitely not all bad. So what was his problem?

He came so close so many times to staying on track only to find himself drinking...*again*. He wanted to be sober more than anything, but *something* would happen and he would have that first beer. He swore that he didn't know why. I believe that he didn't know why. Some say that people who relapse repeatedly like Mike did just don't want sobriety. They are wrong. I know how much Mike wanted to live his life happy, joyous and free. I watched him time after time after time gather together his courage buttons, put them all on, and go once again to an AA meeting and admit to the group that "yes, I drank--*again*. I don't know why."

On February 5, 2010 my boy died of the disease of alcoholism. He was in a treatment facility trying to get sober *again*. Late on the afternoon of February 4th, the hospital found him in his room unconscious. He had hanged himself with his belt. While his death certificate says that his death was a suicide, I know it was alcoholism that killed him. I know that he was tired. I believe that he just couldn't see a future for himself that was not a "Groundhogs' Day" version of what his life had been. And he chose to put a stop to the revolving door the only way he knew.

What failed? Who failed? Who's to blame? I spent 20 years working in the field of alcohol and drug abuse education and training. I'm in recovery. Why couldn't we find someone to save Mike? I have asked those questions many times over the last 20 years, and especially since February 5th. I think the answer is simple, yet complex. Treatment is effective and was effective for Mike. While he was in treatment, he was sober, safe and healthy. He would remain sober, safe and healthy for varying lengths of time each time he left treatment. But, then something would happen...and he would have a recurrence of his symptoms. In plain English, he would get drunk *again*.

I believe that Mike had a very virulent form of alcoholism, and that we don't know enough about this terrible disease to help the 18-million Americans who, like my son, suffer from it. We need to understand the mental obsessions that torment those who chronically relapse, and we need to understand the causes and cures of alcoholism so that we can find viable, effective, affordable

treatment options. It's time to help our policy makers understand the burden this disease places on our country—economically, socially, and spiritually.

As a 21st Century educated adult, I have this burdensome propensity to find meaning in the notable events in my life. I could fabricate a line of BS and tell you that I understand why Mike had to die. But it would be a lie. I don't get it. I probably never will. It makes me damn mad. And very sad. I just know for sure that we need to understand more and do more to fight the stigma of alcoholism or our children will continue to die.

My Mike is with me today, as much as he was on June 27, 1968. I' will love him forever, and I miss him every day.