

CARRYING HIS LEGACY

John was the most beautiful man I had ever seen. Although he was tall—6'3"—with dark skin, dark hair and the most delightful smile, it was his soul that most attracted me. John always invited strangers into our home, protected those most ridiculed, loved the least fortunate. He was so smart, and I was always wowed by the knowledge and insight he had. He had a huge music collection, memorizing each album so that he could hear those songs even when he did not have access to them. He had so many friends that it was hard for me to keep them all straight. We had 14 groomsmen at our wedding, but he wanted more.

When I met him, he had two cats. Bonnie was named after Bonnie and Clyde for the mischievous side of John. Leah was named after the biblical wife of Jacob who was the less attractive of the two sisters and who would likely have never married, had it not been for their father's tricking Jacob. When John saw Leah at the humane society, he was afraid that because of the way she looked, no one would take her home. He immediately made her part of his family. Today, she is beautiful and has the most wonderful disposition. After we married, John insisted that we get a pug, making our house filled with animals and with love. John truly brought brightness to people's lives, carrying with him laughter and joy wherever he was.

Soon after John passed the bar, he began practicing criminal defense law. He knew that if he had asked, his family would have provided him with a lucrative opportunity to join their business. However, John, knowing that one day he would have to put down his trial lawyer guns to join the ranks of real estate lawyers, decided to use

his first few years out of law school to assist the indigent. Immediately, he made friends with judges and fellow attorneys, impressing many. One man who had recently been elevated to the bench gave John his legal resource collection, after just spending the afternoon in his company. Rarely did a person meet him who was not immediately attracted to his warmth, sincerity and spirit.

He was the life of the party, until one day I realized we were no longer having fun. I knew the night before I married him that he suffered from alcoholism and addiction. We accepted that there may be a problem, committed to changing once the ceremonies subsided and looked forward to our future. I thought that would be enough. What I did not understand at the time was that John was suffering from an illness that could not be cured by a commitment to change.

John had a puzzling lack of control when it came to his alcohol intake. He did absurd, incredible and sometimes tragic things while drinking. He was seldom mildly intoxicated. While drinking, his personality would sometimes be nothing like his normal nature—he was like Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. He had a positive genius for getting drunk at exactly the wrong moment. He possessed special abilities, skills and aptitudes and had a promising career ahead of him. These gifts kept me confused for a long time about whether there was a problem. But then, he would go on a senseless series ofsprees causing danger to himself and those around him. He tried different methods of controlling his drinking: He attempted to limit his number of drinks; did not drink during the workday; stopped drinking

scotch; consulted with doctors, therapists and psychiatrists; switched doctors, therapists and psychiatrists; abstained for periods of time; smoked marijuana instead; exercised; took trips; swore off trips; committed himself to a treatment center; and tried many other attempts at control.

What I have learned is the idea that somehow, someday someone will control his or her drinking is the great obsession of every alcoholic. John thought that he could beat the game, but I suspected that he was down for the count. When John started drinking, he had little control over the amount he took and could not, even in those rare times when he honestly wanted to, quit entirely. During those periods when he would swear it off completely, he became restless, irritable and discontented until he was able to take his next drink.

His disease progressed. After his friends left our small college town, John sought out sordid people in disreputable places. The stories of the people John called his "friends" that last year would be funny, if it was not so sad. Our marriage became a constant struggle with our communications limited to my begging him to stop and the toxic fights that followed.

After several episodes, including being intoxicated in court, the bar suggested that John admit himself into a treatment center. He stayed for a few days, but decided that he would get sober his way. I'll never know whether John was serious about quitting or whether he told me he would stop to pacify me. Frankly, it does not matter either way. What I suspect is that when he realized he could not drink successfully, he turned to other numbing, mind-altering substances. Craig Ferguson, late-night host for CBS, talks about how alcoholics

do not have *drinking* problems—they have *thinking* problems that require them to use alcohol to obliterate those thoughts.

I know that if John had a choice, he would not have continued his quest for oblivion. He was watching it destroy me, his family and some of his most cared-about friends. Sometime in April 2005, he sat me down and acknowledged what was happening. He told me that he loved me and promised that things would change. He was serious. However, his sincerity was not enough to keep away the power of alcohol and drugs.

On June 9, 2005, at 11:30 p.m., John was pronounced dead. I lay with him for hours, hoping that I would see a twitch and the doctors would tell me that they had made a huge mistake. John did not intend to leave me that night. He did not want his parents to be childless and his friends to be lost. I would be so angry if I did not know for sure that on that evening, God opened up the gates of hell, and let my husband out. Although we know that it is the combination of the drugs and alcohol he took that night that ultimately caused him to go, we

found out that if things had not changed soon, it was only a matter of time. His grandmother likes to say that John died from having a big heart.

I still think about him every day, mostly in the quiet of the night and the early morning hours when the only sounds I can hear are from our resting animals. They miss him. Bonnie still wanders through his clothes and sleeps on his chair. His parents are still so sad.

Recently, I was with his parents and saw the band that played at our wedding. I went to see them, to celebrate my life with John. What I found out that night was astonishing. The lead singer of that band has not had a drink or any drugs for 15 years. John and I loved him; we thought he was so cool and appreciated how he was able to make everyone have so much fun. When we married, we had no idea that people like him could have that much life and be sober.

I miss my husband. However, lately, I feel so lucky to have known him, to have loved him and to have been loved by him. The thoughts of what could have been

can be overwhelming if I am not careful. It sometimes is excruciating to know that this beautiful, brilliant man will never get a second chance. It also makes me sad that somehow I get to live another day and he does not. I am so thankful to him because, for a few short years, I was able to share his life with him.

I hope the story of John's struggle and my survival can help others. I would hate myself if I let him go without carrying on his legacy of helping those less fortunate.

John and I loved so many people suffering from this debilitating disease and I know there are so many more who share the pain of being an alcoholic or loving one.

There is hope. I have seen many people get sober and many people living with an alcoholic become sane again. If you are unsure what to do, you can call the **Alabama Lawyer Assistance Program (334-834-7576)**. It is a confidential call that may save a life. Or, as Ferguson says, there are people out there who can help, and you can find the organization at the front of any phonebook.

May God give you grace. ■

ALABAMA LAWYER Assistance Program

Are you watching someone you care about self-destructing because of alcohol or drugs?
Are they telling you they have it under control?

They don't.

Are they telling you they can handle it?

They can't.

Maybe they're telling you it's none of your business.

It is.

People entrenched in alcohol or drug dependencies can't see what it is doing to their lives.

You can.

Don't be part of their delusion.

Be part of the solution.

For every one person with alcoholism, at least five other lives are negatively affected by the problem drinking. The Alabama Lawyer Assistance Program is available to help members of the legal profession who suffer from alcohol or drug dependencies. Information and assistance is also available for the spouses, family members and office staff of such members. ALAP is committed to developing a greater awareness and understanding of this illness within the legal profession. If you or someone you know needs help call Jeanne Marie Leslie (ALAP director) at (334) 834-7576 (a confidential direct line) or 24-hour page at (334) 224-6920. All calls are confidential.