



Natural Transitions

Volume 2, Issue 2

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Children and Death



Before Their Time CD Project Provides Solace after Suicide

by Lee Webster

In 1994, cabinet and casket maker Michael Whitman was on vacation with family in Maryland when he learned of his 23-year-old son Breck's death by suicide in southern California—abrupt, inexplicable, unfathomable. While he was en route to Breck by way of his home in New Hampshire, neighbor Sydney Long called and said, "Please come up. I have something to give you."

What she gave to Michael, his wife Lynn, and two younger sons, Tobin and Alec, was *Breck's Song*. As she described it, upon hearing of Breck's death, Sydney was immediately "drawn to the piano, sat down and played the opening verse of the song. The music and lyrics came to me in completed form ... as if from a source outside myself."

*I wish I could have held you.
I wish I could have taken your hand
And kept you safe with my love
From your darkness.*

—from *Breck's Song* by Sydney Long,
Before Their Time, Vol. I

Listening to a cassette recording of the song on the long plane ride west, with his 7-year-old's head in his lap, Michael found the will to meet what was waiting at the funeral home.

"We're used to warm bodies, and his was cold. There was his sweet face ... I kissed him goodbye." Each member of the family had brought a precious item—a Christmas ornament, hockey and ski medals, a quilt—to add to the casket which a friend had arranged to be sent on ahead from Michael's workshop. "Most comforting for the boys was to see the familiar casket out there, to know their brother was in familiar territory."

The family returned home and Michael began to ask the questions that haunt all parents: "Why did this happen? What was the final straw? What was so wrong that it couldn't have been prevented? What could I have done? How could I not have

seen it coming? Why didn't he talk to me?" And, most painful of all: "How could I have failed to protect my child?"

*A lifetime lived out in a moment
And a moment that changes everything.
If there was one thing that I could've said
to you,
What would it take to change your mind...
What would it be, what would it be,
What would it be?*

—from *Stillness of the Night* by Anke
Summerhill, *Before Their Time*, Vol. II

There was nothing that could explain the inexplicable. Michael, who has been an activist for adolescent (ages 10 to 24) suicide prevention ever since, says that in nearly two-thirds of all suicides, there is no note. "I've come to believe that there is a large measure of impulsivity in adolescent and teen suicide, because they don't stop to think about what they're doing. They don't have the life experience to understand that most problems can be either solved or at least improved or mitigated. They can't imagine getting away from the pain.

"In 90 percent of all suicides, depression, drugs, and alcohol are factors," he states. "What most people don't understand is that depression can be a fatal disease. And we weren't aware at the time of the part genetics plays." In Breck's case, alcoholism and addiction were unidentified players in both family histories.

While understanding what the risk factors are may aid in preventing future suicides in adolescence, recovery for parents is a long road fraught with sorrow, guilt, anger, and loss that is not like any other.

"I hear it from parents all the time. A normal, natural, old-age death is in the correct order. This is not the natural order of things." Michael lost his own father and stepfather in the months following Breck's death. "Losing a child is just totally different from losing a parent. It's the worst thing that a parent can go through.

"When you lose a parent, you lose something of a link to the past. When you lose a child, you lose part of your future. There won't be a graduation, there won't be a marriage, there won't be children. I read about my child's classmates' weddings and children. ... It's just not there for me anymore."

*Hearts are broken and dreams are lost
But I made a promise to love at any cost.
Little did I know the price was so high,
Losing forever in the blink of an eye.*

—from *Somewhere between Heaven and Earth* by Cindy Bullens, *Before Their Time*, Vol. II

It's not surprising that Michael eventually found solace in comforting other bereaved parents. The need to do something was there, percolating just below the surface, but the *how* and the *what* didn't come quickly. "Four years later, while I was driving home from work, it happened.

"The idea for *Before Their Time* sprang fully formed. And that's how many of the songs on the CDs were written as well. That's how it came to me—fully formed, title and everything. It's more like it came *through* me.

"I knew that I loved music, had always loved music, and Sydney's song had helped me so much. I wondered if I could make a CD that would provide as much comfort as that one did for me? Poof! Yes!"

The *Before Their Time* project has become three volumes of music compilations intended to uplift and bring hope to the survivors of youth death, especially to parents who have lost children to suicide.

"Right away I started to find songs, and other people started suggesting songs. I got on the national Folk Music DJ online discussion list and began seeing titles: Tom Paxton's *No Time to Say Goodbye* and Kate Rusby's *Who Will Sing Me Lullabies?* They just started coming in."

*It was a phone call in the night—
The kind you hear before it rings.
It was a phone call in the night,
When you can hear an angel's wings.*

—from *No Time to Say Goodbye* by Tom Paxton, *Before Their Time*, Vol. I

When professionals in the music business told him it couldn't be done, that getting the rights to use the music and then the rights to recordings of the music would be a nightmare and take forever, Michael didn't give up. He learned that the first thing he had to do was find the right person and that "the higher up the chain of fame, the harder it is to get to them."

But what happened next continued to happen: Friends of friends knew someone who knew someone who could help. His old college girlfriend, for instance, knew someone in her North Carolina chorus who handled John Rutter's US permissions, and six weeks after writing to him, Michael received a handwritten note from London with permission from Rutter himself to use his requiem's final movement, "Lux Aeterna."

*I heard a voice from heaven saying unto me,
Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord,
For they rest from their labors: even so saith the Spirit.*

—text from the *Anglican Church's Burial Service* (1662 Book of Common Prayer, slightly altered)

And musicians from all genres kept saying yes. Out of 120 requests, only three didn't work out. All the rest were offered freely, and with appreciation for being included.

The project's \$100K production costs were eventually funded entirely by donations and grants, and all proceeds from sales continue to be donated to New Hampshire and national hospice and suicide-prevention programs. The CDs are also provided free of charge to grieving families by hospices, mental health agencies, churches, and other helping organizations throughout the country.

For some parents, projects such as *Before Their Time* become their own lifeline; one of the myriad responses to child loss is contemplation of suicide by family members themselves, parents included. The book, *A Broken Heart Still Beats: After Your Child Dies* by Anne McCracken and Mary Semel, is one such project, chronicling over 300 authors—famous and little known—who have taken up the

work of capturing the language of grief in stories, poems, and memoirs. (See review page 25.)

At some point, the need to tell the story in some form, to surrender to narrative impulse, is cleansing and cathartic. Michael said, "Working on something to help other parents in the grief I knew they were suffering contributed to my own healing because I was *doing* something. I was drawn to a music project because I've always been involved in music, but others who undertake their own projects choose something close to their heart or that springs from their own forms of creative expression."

The loss of a child leaves parents with the unimaginable task of knitting together the hole that their child's death has created in the fabric of their lives. Michael recalls wondering for weeks if the day would ever come when Breck's death would not be the first thing he thought of upon waking.

"There are issues with loss by suicide that aren't there when a child is lost to illness or accident or some other means. But I've learned that people find ways to cope. I found a way. And I hope it inspires others to find their own path."

Michael Whitman of Lyme, NH, may be reached through his website www.beforetheirtime.org or at michael.whitman@valley.net.

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For more information on *Before Their Time* CDs visit www.beforetheirtime.org.

Other Resources:

The Suicide Paradigm:

www.lifeguard.tripod.com

A site for those who have experienced suicide loss and those who want to know more about suicide and its aftermath.

The American Association of

Suicidology: www.suicidology.org

A site providing how-to information for people who want to start a Survivors of Suicide (SOS) group in their area.

Parents of Suicides Memorial Sharing:

www.pos-ffos.com

A site for parents, family, and friends to share remembrances and to connect with others who have experienced the loss of a child through suicide.



Michael and Breck 1978