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Take a stand against suicide

By Terry Bentley Hill

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It's after 10:30 p.m. on Palm Sunday, 1995.

News crews with their live trucks are parked in my front yard and have interrupted regular TV programming to report that my husband, Danny Hill, the 47th Judicial District Attorney, had taken his life in our family home.

Years of struggling with alcoholism and depression overwhelmed his higher thoughts, his reasonable thoughts, his clear thoughts, and led him into a black hole of hopelessness and anger. It fueled his horrible decision to walk into our bedroom with a gun to end his suffering and pain. In his suicide notes, he wrote that I would be better off without him and that I would find a better father for our children.

A super-lawyer

Danny's 1973 Texas Tech Law School class could be considered the breeding ground for elected district attorneys. In the Panhandle alone, four alumni held the position of top prosecutor. By the time Danny ran for the post of the 47th Judicial District Attorney (Potter and Randall Counties), he had already served two terms in the Texas House of Representatives for the 86th District. At 34, he was the youngest DA in the state.

Whip smart and charismatic, he demanded a lot of himself. He tried many cases, and juries never returned a two-word verdict. He created the Special Crimes Unit, which investigated serious criminal offenses, and founded the Victim Assistance Program, which a majority of Texas DA's offices imitated and implemented. Nine months before he died, he was named State Bar Prosecutor of the Year.

Danny had the heart of a prosecutor. In fact, he invested all of himself in the job after a life-changing event that occurred months after receiving his law license. Danny's first job was with a criminal defense firm in Lubbock. As a brand-new attorney, he represented a defendant for aggravated robbery, and the man was found not guilty. Two days after the verdict, the man shot and killed a cashier at a fast food restaurant, and it devastated Danny. He promptly resigned from his firm and dedicated his life to service as a prosecutor. He joined the Texas District and County Attorneys Association (TDCAA) and served on legislative committees and the executive board and finally as Board President. In 1994, he ran for President of the National District Attorneys Association and lost by only six votes.

A deadly combination

Danny took his first drink of alcohol his senior year of high school, and it was that drink, not the last drink, that killed him. That's because alcoholism is a progressive disease. Untreated, it can be fatal. It is cunning, baffling, and powerful. It interferes with relationships, vocations, hopes, and dreams. It destroys the drinker, and it destroys his family. Everybody gets sick. Couple the alcoholism with depression, as in Danny's case, and the combination is deadly.

No one really knows the secrets that lurk behind closed doors, but the secrets kept us sick—kept the whole family sick. Shame kept us isolated and silent. We never confided in or consulted

friends or family about our problems. The notion of public exposure, scorn, and judgment so repulsed Danny that even car wrecks, chaos, marital discord, violence, and a removal suit did not stop his substance abuse. Eventually he chose death over life.

When a person dies by suicide, statistics show at least 18 people are directly affected. Suicide is the most complicated death to grieve. Oftentimes the last words spoken are not ones of love and affection, and survivors are left reeling with the burden of responsibility and self-blame. Ten days after Danny died, I walked into my bathroom, looked at myself in the mirror, and did not recognize the person staring at me. I glanced at the TV as a special news report from Oklahoma City showed a collapsed building billowing in smoke—a federal building had been bombed earlier that day, 168 people were killed, and hundreds more were injured—and when I glanced back at myself, I realized that building represented my life. Part of me died with Danny that night. I had so many questions, so many whys, but none that he could answer, and because of the public nature of Danny's life (and his death), I had nowhere to hide. I quickly realized that my four daughters and I needed a shelter of anonymity to begin the healing process, so I moved back home to Dallas, where our family and friends could surround us with support while we learned to live one day at a time.

In 1998, a few years after Danny's death, the PBS station in the Panhandle produced an Edward R. Murrow Award-winning documentary called *Danny Hill: Public Image, Private Pain*.¹ In it, I spoke of our life together and the battle with addiction: the denial, the failed attempts to hide and control the illness, and the fear that if we sought help, Danny's legal and political career would suffer. Rather than continuing to live in the hidden isolation of addiction, I decided that sharing my experiences may encourage others to step out of their own shadows.

TDCAA asked me to present the video and tell my story at its annual conference—the association's leadership bravely faced the undeniable fact that the stressors of the legal profession were taking a toll on its members. When I presented, the room was packed with elected and assistant district attorneys, many of whom knew Danny when he served as President. After they heard from me, they also heard from two other attorneys, an Austin lawyer and the Chief Justice of the 13th Court of Appeals, who told their stories of recovery. Both were volunteers with the Texas Lawyers Assistance Program (TLAP). As I listened to their brutally honest stories, I wished that Danny could have heard them. Maybe they would have given him the courage to face his issues—after all, they were highly successful lawyers and not ashamed of their struggles.

Collateral damage

At the age of 47, I accomplished a long-term goal: I entered law school. The desire to practice law began while covering the courthouse as a news reporter 25 years earlier. As a reporter, I had been a passive participant, but now I wanted to step inside the Bar and become an active player in the justice system. Two weeks into classes, on a Wednesday evening, my phone rang with news that shattered my heart: I lost my 14-year-old daughter to depression. She too had committed suicide. Hallie was the youngest of my four girls, and like her sisters, she was heart-broken and traumatized when her father died. What Danny did not know is that his suicide would open a door that his children might walk through themselves. When a parent suicides, the odds that a child will also die by suicide increase dramatically.

After Hallie died, I withdrew from school and went to therapy twice a week for nine months, took medication to boost depleted serotonin and dopamine, and joined support groups. That July, I had to decide whether to re-enroll in law school and resume my education. Grief had shattered

my confidence, and it had affected my concentration, memory retention, and focus. After I shared my fears during a therapy session, my counselor spoke some words that changed my life. She told me, “I’m not in the business of telling my patients what to do, but I am telling you: You are going to law school. You are going to take it one semester at a time, and in three years when you walk across the stage and receive your hood and diploma, you will know there is nothing you cannot accomplish.” Her words were just what I needed to hear. I re-enrolled in school, and three years later, I walked across the stage to receive my diploma. The loudest cheers came from my three daughters in the audience.

After receiving my bar results, the first call I made was to TLAP—I remembered those two brave attorneys I met years before at TDCAA’s Annual, and they had inspired me to volunteer. I have learned that Danny’s story is not unique. Attorneys experience depression, anxiety, and stress more than any other professionals. Substance and alcohol abuse is alarmingly common, especially for young attorneys in their first 10 years of practice. Suicides and suicidal ideation are on the rise. Every aspect of the sufferer’s life is affected by these illnesses: Work, relationships, parenting, and friendships become secondary to the obsessive energy and focus it takes to “manage” the problems. It is the fear of exposure, the inability to pierce the veil of silence, a culture of perfectionism, and the threat of economic consequences that drive our colleagues away from help and toward desperate measures. Prosecutors who daily experience the emotionally charged world of crime victims and pressure as the conduit to justice are particularly susceptible to stressors and secondary post-traumatic stress disorder. I recall how the autopsy of a 6-year-old girl haunted Danny and contributed to his depression and self-medication. As a mental health advocate and board member of the Suicide Crisis Center of North Texas, my purpose is to acknowledge the unique demands of prosecutors and to offer solutions and hope.

Mental illness and substance abuse are treatable conditions. Help is available to any Texas attorney through the Texas Lawyers Assistance Program, Lawyers Concerned for Lawyers, and the Confidential Depressive Group for Attorneys. Studies show that the most effective recovery from mental illness and addiction is like a three-legged stool where medicine, cognitive therapy, and peer support are each a leg, and each is dependent on the other. When you do not know where to turn, or if you know a colleague who is struggling, the “911” number for attorneys is 800/343-TLAP (8527).