

TRUE LIFE STORY FOR WEBSITE

July 10th, 2008

(Names have been changed to protect the privacy of those involved)

I wish I were doing this under better circumstances, but it's often a situation like this that starts a cause in the first place. I'm glad that my sister could recommend you [as the charity to receive gifts in lieu of flowers at the funeral], it seemed such a good idea to think of prevention rather than cure, and I was all for it as soon as she suggested it.

I have been thinking about writing to you for some time now, but could not put words to paper before now. I've been trying to think of what to write that you might be able to use in your own work – if you so wish, that is. I am happy for you to use my letter in any way you see fit, if it helps another from going down the same path, all the better.

Right, here goes, a brief history first, and then I have written a full account of the last days and hours.

I met Louise some 25 years ago in the St Albans Scouts Gang Show, although it was a few years before we went out together. In 1988 we bought our first house, and we were married in 1989. We had lots of good times, as most young couples do. In 1994 Becky arrived on the scene, and has been a joy in our lives.

Since then, Louise tried to make herself busy in different ways, always seeking self confidence and self worth – it was important to her that she did her bit (although being a Mum is pretty full time). Now I have time to reflect, clearly the problems with alcohol started many years ago, although you think it's just a bit of a tippie at the time. Louise was not a heavy drinker when she was young though, but I suspect that the cause of her problems started then. Since the birth of Becky, Louise became depressed and had very low self-esteem, and was always striving to do better. Little did Louise believe that we wanted no more from her than to be a good Mum to Becky.

Obviously, she turned to alcohol to hide her depression and drown her sorrows. She did try working from home for a while, a bit of ironing, and then childminding. I thought they would help her, but she still continued to drink, work hard and be a normal Mum and housewife simultaneously. Eventually, she lost even those jobs as the drinking took hold. She even started to suffer very badly with psoriasis (a painful skin disorder), but at that time I had no idea that the alcohol was the probable cause.

At this point we were at a financial crisis, and we had an opportunity to move and start afresh. Thanks to my sister we managed to rent her home in Durham and make a new start up here. I found a new job very quickly, and enjoyed that very much. We got Becky into the local school, and all was looking very good for the future. We managed to buy a new home nearby too.

Louise was always adamant that Becky would be brought up by her parent, and not a childminder, so she started to look for part-time work. However, as much as every [employer] advertises 'family friendly' working conditions, they are never there when you ask. It was impossible to find a job for her that suited the hours needed. Everybody understands your needs, but cannot actually offer the position to suit. During this time, Louise's drinking got much worse as her self-esteem sank lower and lower. Nothing I could do would bring her out of it.

Eventually, with the help of my sister, just under two years ago we did confront Louise fully with the problem. We offered help and support. Unfortunately, she did not want to take it.

As much as I tried to bring happiness into her life, it was not within herself to accept it. I was working hard full time, and my commute was 22 miles each way. It meant I was away from home up to 12 hours a day. By the time I got home Louise was drunk, and unapproachable.

Unfortunately, the drinking had been hidden from me all the time. I have no idea how much she had been drinking, although it was obvious it was a considerable amount, and she always kept it secret from me. She had even told me that she'd been to the doctor for blood tests, and they were OK.

Earlier this year Louise started to feel unwell. It looked just like a bit of flu, but then she started to get jaundiced, and again she told me that she'd been to the doctors, and was told to go back in a couple of weeks if it hadn't gotten better. If you knew how much Louise hated lies, you can understand why I believed her. Of course, it became obvious that she hadn't been to the doctors at all.

She got worse, and I was still thinking she was just not getting clear of a bad virus. Obviously the alcohol wasn't helping. During this time I was begging her to get some help, but she was insistent that she didn't need any. In the end, I couldn't bear it any longer, and I took a day off work and called in the doctor. He was very reluctant even to come and visit, as Louise refused his help. I persuaded the doctor to call anyway, and he took one look and advised her to get to hospital immediately. He wasn't able to examine her, or refer her as she was able to answer some simple questions, and she refused treatment.

At this point I was confused and distraught, I couldn't believe the doctor walked away and could do nothing. I called my sister, and she drove up that evening, between the two of us we convinced her to go to the hospital, and called an ambulance. However, she still wasn't having any of it, and we had to turn away the ambulance. Next morning, we finally got her to go, and got her into hospital just after 10:00 am on the Friday morning.

We were so relieved at this point, we knew she had to get to a personal crisis, and could then get treatment. Doctors were with her as soon as we got there, and they carried out tests straight away. Initially, we talked about treatment, reversal of damage to the liver, or possible transplants. This was such good news, we finally had the warning shot we'd been waiting for.

Louise was taken to a ward for further tests, and some initial treatments. We were sent home, as visitors were not allowed out of hours here. We did so with lifted spirits, thinking this was a road to recovery, and we were to return after 6:00 pm for normal visiting.

Mid-afternoon I got a call from the hospital staff asking me to pop in a few minutes earlier than normal visiting, as their consultant finished then, and needed to talk to me about Louise's treatment. Again, this was promising, talking about treatment was good news.

Or so I thought! When I got back to the hospital, the consultant sat me down in a room, and then told me the news, Louise had a five percent chance of surviving the weekend. Of course, I was stunned, and at first it didn't sink in. Until I had to tell my sister (who had been with Becky up to now), when I broke down. Louise had been taken up to the Intensive Treatment Unit, and they were treating her for multiple organ failure. By the time we got there, she was full of tubes, and they were pouring fluids into her, as well as a full blood transfusion.

The staff at the hospital were brilliant, and were obviously trying as hard as they could to make Louise better. By midnight Louise's Mum and brother had arrived from St Albans, and they were there for a while before we went back home for the night. Louise had

shown some improvement, and the data on the machines was looking promising, and all the time up to now she had been conscious, and able to have a conversation. Again, we left with a little lift in our spirits.

We managed to get about an hour's sleep when the hospital called, Louise had taken a turn for the worse. Myself and Rob (Louise's brother) rushed back at 3:15 am, and she was in a very bad way, she had now lost consciousness, and her skin was starting to discolour too (a sign of alcohol poisoning). Her breathing was now on automatic, and was very distressing to see, all of her organs had failed, and the brain was now being damaged too. We were advised that she maybe had 4-6 hours left before she died.

There is nothing that can prepare you for this moment, nothing anybody else can say that helps. I am grateful to the hospital staff for being so warm and understanding, and for Rob, even though we were blokes, we cried across each others' shoulders.

In the final hours, we called home and got my sister there as soon as we could, she stayed a short while, and then we sent her back to get Louise's Mum, who stayed to the end. We needed somebody to look after Becky at home, as there was no way we thought she should see her Mum like this. Myself and Rob went off for some breakfast about 8:30, even though I wasn't in the mood for eating, Rob insisted, so I did. As we got back to the ward, Louise was gasping her last breaths.

We sat by the bed, myself, Rob and Louise's Mum, holding hands and crying as we watched her stop breathing and the machines stop recording – it was just before 10 am, less than 24 hours since I got her there.

We came back later, and the staff had made a small chapel of rest for her (the main one was closed for the weekend). They made her look lovely, and she was so at peace – we even brought Becky along too. Even the nurses were in tears too, it was so obvious how loved Louise had been. Unfortunately, Louise hadn't loved herself for some time.

The first few days were hardest, I was unable to comprehend what had happened at all, and even weeks later I still cannot believe it has happened. I do now have some kind of future to look to; Becky is going to need me for a start (and I'll need her too).

One thing that really concerned me, after the event, it started to become clear that this was not an isolated incident, even in the family we hear similar stories. I now know that this is one of the biggest killers we have after cancer and car crashes.

Even though I do not have a problem with alcohol myself, I have not touched a drop of alcohol since that dreadful weekend in May, and I know my sister hasn't either.

If the donations we have sent, and this letter (I apologise for it being so long), can help towards preventing just one person having to endure a loss like this, then we might consider that some good has come from this.

It has been hard putting this all onto paper, it's the first time I've actually recalled all of this to anybody, but I feel it is worth it, and it has helped me a little too. If I can help more in any way, albeit with limited abilities, I would be happy to do so.

Kind regards,
Mick Bennett