

**My Prodigal Son  
*and*  
Our Journey Together**



**Mike Cannell**

In Memory  
*Of*  
Michael Christopher Cannell



1980 - 2017

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**Mike Cannell**



## DEDICATION

I dedicate this book to my grandchildren, Caleb and Ellie, who will someday face the same crossroads as their Uncle Mike encountered. This book is your Uncle's account of his life before and after addiction took hold of him.

Michael has visited me time and time again in my dreams. He is asking me to give purpose to his life. I believe the best way I can accomplish this for him is to tell you his story; a story he does not want repeated especially by his family.

Michael's life story will impact you in one way or another, as we are connected—we are family. And family wants the best for each other.



## **TO FAMILY AND FRIENDS**

If you are reading this book, you are likely a family member or a friend of Michael's, which is exactly what he would want.

Michael loved and spoke of his relatives and friends all of the time. They were most important to him, which becomes quite clear as you read of Michael's life story.

The book includes a number of pictures and stories of his life to reignite good and instructional memories of him to those who knew him well.

Although the book speaks directly to Michael's family and friends, it is written broadly enough to appeal to others who may benefit from it.





## PREFACE

If you are on the road to drug and alcohol addiction, this book may prove beneficial for you and your loved ones. This book sends a warning shot to those traveling down the path of addiction.

It describes the pain and suffering addicts goes through, and the heartache it brings upon those who love them most—those, like me, who find themselves watching helplessly from the sidelines as their loved one destroy themselves.

I pray this book will help anyone who sees a loved one heading towards addiction and is desperate to help them. It provides a first-hand account of my son's life from the beginning to his end. It is written in a relational, casual, and informal manner to make it easy for the reader to identify with and learn from mine and my son's mistakes so they will not be repeated.

Much emphasis is given to those years when Michael was in high school; those years where he was emotionally immature and most susceptible to experiment with alcohol and drugs. During my son's years in high school, he and his friends were considered cool. Together these cool kids took the bait; they drank and experimented with drugs, suspecting nothing would come of it but a good time.

Fast forward just a few years later when Michael became so intoxicated that he awoke from his blackout to find himself lost behind some stranger's house with no shirt on and ants crawling all over him. His life wasn't so cool anymore. Where were his friends to help? It was not the first nor the last time Michael humiliated himself from intoxication and drug use.

There are many books written by parents of addicted children, some of which gave me hope when Michael was alive. The painful reality of these books was hard for me to swallow. Although they gave me some optimism for my son's recovery, they never gave me what I wanted most. I wanted to hear there were answers that when

implemented, would cure my son 100% with no chance of a relapse. But that isn't reality, no matter how much I prayed and wanted it to be.

I empathize with parents who worry about their son/daughter day and night as I did. I could never relax. During my son's journey, I anticipated the worst every day, every hour, and every minute. When the phone rang, I never knew what to expect, but always assumed the worse.

There used to be a public safety broadcast that aired on TV in the evening asking, "*Do you know where your child is tonight?*" No, I didn't! The fact that he was in his thirties made me worry even more. He was old enough to drive a car, drink, consume drugs, gamble, and get into fights. He was dangerous.

Throughout this book, I reference a number of Biblical passages, but, I want to emphasize this is not a religious book. I used these passages because I grew up with the Bible and looked to it for answers and comfort following my son's death. In a sense they were as Simon & Garfunkel writes in their song "*I am a Rock*" ... "*my books and poetry to protect me.*"

I am not interested in converting anyone to any faith whatsoever. I do hope this book may convert someone on the road to addiction to see the light and change his/her direction before it is too late.

\* \* \*

- ❖ *1. Biblical passages cited are referenced from the New American Standard Bible.*
- ❖ *2. Addiction assumes a state of being caused by either alcohol or drugs.*
- ❖ *3. For the privacy of Michael's friends, employers, and locations, I have changed their names.*

## WHY WRITE THE BOOK?

Family and friends asked me why I wrote this book. It is simple. Had I come across such a book when Michael was in high school, I would have taken notice. I wrote this book for someone like myself, who didn't even consider there was trouble brewing with his/her child's behavior.

I wrote this book to illustrate a type of shock value that could change someone's course. Years ago, I watched a movie that had shock value, and I remembered how effective it was in making its point. The film, "*Apocalypse Now*," starring Marlon Brando, was released in 1979. This film left an impression on me that has lasted to this day.

This movie illustrates the harsh realities of the Vietnam war demonstrating that no one in their right mind would ever repeat the mistakes that led to such a war (or one would think). In the movie, Marlon Brando plays Captain Willard who goes mad from witnessing and participating in the cruelty of the war. In the end, the Captain is put down after reaching a point of no return. He would never heal and would only get worse similar to an addict who is beyond reach.

It was profoundly painful to watch the movie, which is exactly why it has stuck with me all these years. As impactful as it is, I don't want to watch it ever again due to its vivid depictions of death and suffering. I got the point of the movie during the first watch, and don't care to see those horrific scenes again. This is what I hope to accomplish in this book. I want it to be a book the reader will never forget by shocking them with the truth and horrors of addiction, and in such a way they get the message the first time.

This book was somewhat embarrassing for me to write. It exposes my weaknesses, my vulnerabilities, and mistakes I made as well as Michael's. Because of such exposure, I almost didn't write it. Yet I

reasoned that if this story could alter the direction of someone's child or loved one, it would be worth it. It is what Michael would have wanted.

Two recent events occurred simultaneously; both of which motivated me to write the book. After three years following Michael's death, I began to read what other's wrote about him on Facebook and in emails. I had no idea how many people my son helped—others who were suffering from addiction as he was.

There are over 20 pages of testimonials from over forty people describing beautiful stories of Michael's benevolent nature. I was so proud to read them. In one Facebook video, a friend shared his affection for Michael by singing a song to his survivors. I never knew these stories before. Michael never shared them with me.

The second event was reading a book titled "*Man's Search for Meaning*", written by Dr. Victor E. Frankl, at the same time I was musing over Michael's testimonials. The book describes the horrors Frankl and his fellow prisoners went through as prisoners of German Concentration camps during World War II.

Dr. Frankl writes how he survived the war because he believed his life had a purpose, but his purpose could only materialize if he survived the war. No matter how terrible the conditions were in the camps, he convinced himself he had to get through the war to make his life matter.

Being a psychiatrist, he took his purpose-driven life experience and developed a medical treatment known as "*logotherapy*." It is a method that helps the hopeless and depressed find their life's purpose as their cure.

After reading Michael's testimonials and Dr. Frankl's book at the same time, I felt compelled to bring purpose and meaning to Michael's life.

In Frankl's book, he describes how one can bring an experience from the past into the present and give it meaning it never had before. It made me realize I could bring purpose and meaning to my son's life. I can't think of a better way to honor Michael's life and

give meaning to it than sharing his cautionary tale to help others avoid the trappings of drugs and alcohol.



# TABLE OF CONTENTS

DEDICATION .....	I
TO FAMILY AND FRIENDS .....	III
PREFACE .....	V
WHY WRITE THE BOOK? .....	VII
TABLE OF CONTENTS .....	XI
CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION.....	1
CHAPTER 2 THE PREGNANT PRAYER .....	7
CHAPTER 3 GOD -WHAT DID YOU DO TO HIM? .....	11
CHAPTER 4 WE WERE VERY CLOSE.....	17
CHAPTER 5 GOD .....	21
CHAPTER 6 SOCIAL INJUSTICE .....	25
CHAPTER 7 SPORTS AS AN ADOLESCENT.....	29
CHAPTER 8 SPORTS IN HIGH SCHOOL.....	39
CHAPTER 9 NEW FRIENDS AND HIGH ROLLERS .....	45
CHAPTER 10 FAIRFAX PREPARATORY SCHOOL .....	49
CHAPTER 11 TRUTH & CONSEQUENCES .....	53
CHAPTER 12 EMPLOYMENT .....	59
CHAPTER 13 POST BRAZIL .....	65
CHAPTER 14 THE STRANGEST DREAM.....	67
CHAPTER 15 REHAB .....	71
CHAPTER 16 THE REHAB TRIP FROM HELL .....	77
CHAPTER 17 THE WORST OF ALL THIEVES.....	79
CHAPTER 18 ON THE EVE OF HIS DEATH .....	87
CHAPTER 19 PLUCKED OUT .....	91
CHAPTER 20 MICHAEL MICHAEL OH MY SON MICHAEL .	95
CHAPTER 21 A TRIBUTE TO MY BIG BROTHER .....	99

<b>CHAPTER 22 MICHAEL FROM THE OTHER SIDE.....</b>	<b>103</b>
<b>CHAPTER 23 WARNING SIGNS .....</b>	<b>105</b>
<b>CHAPTER 24 HAPPY BIRTHDAY .....</b>	<b>111</b>
<b>CHAPTER 25 HOW WILL HE BE REMEMBERED.....</b>	<b>113</b>
<b>CHAPTER 26 A FRIEND LIKE ABRAHAM .....</b>	<b>117</b>
<b>CHAPTER 27 DAD’S AFTERMATH .....</b>	<b>121</b>
<b>CHAPTER 28 NEAR DEATH EXPERIENCES.....</b>	<b>125</b>
<b>CHAPTER 29 I’M SORRY .....</b>	<b>137</b>
<b>CHAPTER 30 MY COWBOY .....</b>	<b>143</b>



# CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

### *The Original Prodigal Son*

In Luke 15, there is a beautiful parable known as “The Prodigal Son.” The son in this parable parallels my son’s life. It tells a story of a young man who blows all of his money drinking and living a life that leaves him broke, hungry, and ashamed. Once he runs out of money, he finds himself employed feeding pigs who are eating better than himself. Repentant, he comes home hoping his father will forgive him and take him back. The following is what his father spoke to his beloved son.

*“Bring out the best robe and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand and sandals on his feet; and bring the fattened calf, kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; for this son of mine was dead and has come to life again; he was lost and has been found.’ And they began to celebrate.”*

I can’t tell you how much I prayed for my son Michael to make it back home. He tried so hard and so many times, but his addictions forbid it. They refused to give him hope of ever returning to the one place where peace, joy and love were awaiting him.

It has been three years ago that Michael passed away. Not a day goes by that I don’t sigh in grief, especially when I find something interesting, exciting, or enjoyable only to remember I can’t share it with him.

Let me be upfront to the reader. This story does not end well. My son, Michael, died on June 17, 2017, at the age of 36. The autopsy report stated the cause of death was fentanyl, a potent synthetic opioid analgesic similar to morphine but 50 to 100 times more potent. In truth, he was dying daily.

How did his life end this way? Was it genetics, the environment, ineffective parental skills, or some combination of them all? I believe they all contributed; however, the most significant factor was Michael. He knowingly leaned into self-destructive behaviors. He became a victim of his own making; he became the victimizer of himself.

I will not make excuses for my son, and if he were here, he wouldn't either. If Michael was in court for the sins he committed, and the judge asked, "*How do you plead to all these charges against you?*" He would jump up and say, "GUILTY," and he would not ask for leniency. He was so sorrowful during his last days, and it just pained me to watch him beat himself up.

The night following his death, I had a dream. He was standing and facing me. He waved to me with a frown of disappointment. He never blinked. He walked sideways, facing me the entire way as he moved to my left until he stepped backward behind a wall and disappeared.

I awoke disturbed, but I had this feeling that on the day of my own death, he will reappear reversing his steps to greet me with a smile. Somehow, he will find his way back to me through the grace of God. Who knows—maybe he is working right now to build a better place for me, his family, and his friends. A certain verse came to my mind immediately afterward... before Jesus ascended to heaven, he told his friends that He would go ahead of them to prepare a place for them.

I didn't just see Michael in my dream that night; I see him in my dreams almost every night. Recently, I dreamt that we were walking down an empty train station—just the two of us. Our arms were locked together, and our heads leaned on each other's as both of us cried profusely. Michael has been communicating to me in dreams, thoughts, and often through music since the day he passed.

What you are about to read may sound strange, but Michael is asking me to do something for him—to give meaning to his life. He is urging me to give his confession of sins and failures as a warning to those considering taking the road he traveled.

The most poetic way I can convey Michael's urging me to bring life to his past is by listening to a song by Art Garfunkel "*That's All I Know*." It resonated with me when I heard its message below.

*After our Singer has gone, let his songs live on — All his plans have fallen through, and now his plans depend on you to see them grow.*

When I heard these words, I understood he was asking me to sing his plans to fruition. In response, I wrote this for Michael as my gift to him; a gift for the ages to come.

This book shows the good, bad and the ugly side of Michael's life. During his life, he said and did things he nor I am proud of. But let no one forget: Michael is not the only one who struggled and failed repeatedly. The Apostle Paul describes the exact same struggles in Romans 7:14 and 8:1, as follows.

*"For we know that the Law is spiritual, but I am of flesh, sold into bondage to sin. For what I am doing, I do not understand; for I am not practicing what I would like to do, but I am doing the very thing I hate.*

*But if I do the very thing I do not want to do, I agree with the Law, confessing that the Law is good. So now, no longer am I the one doing it, but sin which dwells in me.... Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death."*

Michael is sorry for many decisions he made and he humbly asked God for forgiveness, like the man crucified by Jesus, who repented and found himself in paradise that same day. Yet, there is some "religious" folk who believe he got what he deserved by reaping what he sowed.

I offer to them what Jesus said to those eager to point fingers. "*He who is without sin among you, let him be the first to throw a stone at her.*" Not looking for anything but the worst of others, these sort of people will fail to see that my son was charitable and loved by many; something very few people attain during their lifetime.

Following Michael's memorial service, our family received numerous testimonials that spoke to his many acts of charity. He gave love often and freely, expecting nothing in return. Michael never shared these stories with me, but I will share them for anyone who will listen and learn from them.

I was so proud of Michael when I learned for example, how he would stop on the freeway to help people put their spare tire on, how he lent his truck to friends in need for months at a time, and how he gave away his fancy watch to someone who was awestruck by it. These are just a few of his acts of kindness.

My son was and is a good man and he wants one last chance to do something good—something eternal, and beyond the grave. He wants to save one who is wiser than he was.

I used to say Michael was bigger than life, and to me, he still is. If you go to his Facebook page, you will see why. When I look at the posted pictures and video clips of him, it amazes me how many friends Michael had and how many talents he possessed to entertain them. He was a lot of fun to be around, but only when he was sober, and that's the truth. Entertaining when he was intoxicated was anything but fun to watch. It was embarrassing

Following his memorial service in Orlando, I spoke to many of his friends. Michael loved his friends and used to talk to me about them all the time. However, it was those he befriended during his stays at rehab facilities that grabbed my attention.

Even in such a depressing environment where there isn't much to enjoy, I discovered Michael cheered up his fellow patients through acts of kindness. He constantly found ways to make them laugh through antics and goofing around. He did anything to make them smile, even if it meant getting him kicked out, which did happen, but only once (I think).

### ***The Point of No Return***

My son spent many years in self-denial until it was too late. He foolishly believed he could choose, at any time, to turn off the faucets of alcohol and drugs at will. Instead, he discovered that after ignoring his conscious for so long, it finally left him and took

Michael's gift of free with it as a consequence. From then on, he found himself helplessly subjected to the will of his addictions, which mercilessly brought him past the point of no return. His vices permanently changed him—just as they did to Dr. Jekyll, who lost control of his life to the evil Mr. Hyde. Both Mr. Hyde and Michael failed to get back the lives they once had. They both passed the point of no return.

When Michael realized he was behind enemy lines, he wanted to get back desperately, but he was unable to. It was too late. By the time Michael knew where he was, he found himself unarmed with an unloaded pistol to do battle with.

Unfortunately, all the crying, regret, and praying will not change the outcome for the addict that has reached this point. Those who love him/her are powerless to help and weep more for the addict than the addict does for themselves. The addict's life becomes his/her's own personal apocalypse, and in the end, they won't even recognize who they were. For them, death becomes a better option than life.

This book explores my son's life from the cradle to the grave. It is in a sense an autopsy of his life as I wanted to understand what went wrong and where I failed. It might help someone else.

### ***The Long and Winding Journey Down***

This book demonstrates that the journey an addict takes is not taken alone. It drags the whole family down with the addict, even though that is the last thing someone like my son would have wanted.

Michael naively believed he could stop before it ever affected his family and friends. Unfortunately, no clock tells an addict when to stop before it is too late. Addiction is much too seditious to give anyone a heads up. I do believe if Michael had the foresight to comprehend how much pain his decisions would cause to those he loved, he would never have taken the journey he did.

Until Michael's death, I had never lost a close friend or a sibling. My parents (Michael's grandparents) are still alive and are in their nineties. So unnatural and unsettling it is for a child to pass before his parents and grandparents.

Following Michael's death, many tried to comfort me. They reminded me it was not my fault and that I did all I could. It didn't help. I recently watched a movie starring Jodie Foster titled "*Hotel Artemis*." In the film, she loses her son. She can't get over it, and she is always in mourning. In the movie, a colleague of hers reminds her that her son's death wasn't her fault. Jodie then asks her if she has any kids, which she affirms. Jodie tells her she should know the obvious. As a parent she responds, "*it's always our fault.*"

This is precisely how I feel. I hope you never have to feel this way. I hope this book helps

## CHAPTER 2

### THE PREGNANT PRAYER

#### *Be Careful What You Pray For*

I have been a serious reader of the Bible from my teenage years to this day, so I know God begins to shape a child even from his/her mother's womb. Specifically, in Psalm 139:13-16 the writer says:

*“For You formed my inward parts; You wove me in my mother's womb. I will give thanks to You, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made; Wonderful are Your works, And my soul knows it very well. My frame was not hidden from You, When I was made in secret, And skillfully wrought in the depths of the earth...”*

It was important to me that God got Michael's pregnancy right. Having seen my brother Joe suffer from autism, I prayed my son would be free from this condition and any other disease or disability. It was difficult to see the struggles my brother Joe went through, and I didn't want that for my child. It was just as difficult, if not more so for my parents. I admire them so much for their love and commitment to Joe, but I didn't want to suffer as they did.

I remember putting my hands on my wife Carol's stomach during her pregnancy and praying something along these lines: *“Lord, let this child be one that is free of any ills. Let him be a leader who is exceptionally smart, good looking, athletic, strong, and spiritual.”* Admittedly, I prayed for much more than just normalcy. I wanted a superman. I wanted him to be more than I was. I unintentionally prayed for lightning in a bottle.

Did God answer this prayer... kind of, sort of, I think. Michael grew up smart, handsome, strong, athletic, and talented in so many ways. I may have forgotten the one thing Michael wanted most,

which was to be tall. Even though he was 5' 7" (like Tom Cruise), he always complained how being short was ruining his life, and, unfortunately, he sort of let it

One thing Michael was not short on was intelligence. He showed early signs that he was very bright and tested with an IQ score of 139. We knew that with the right teachers and curriculum, Michael could be anything he wanted to become.

Fortunately, his mother was one of those parents who made sure her kids would get a good start in the public school system. In each school our kids attended, all the teachers knew my wife, and she knew all of them. She made sure our kids would only get the *right* teachers. If there was any sign of a learning deficiency in our kids, she was quick to get the extra help they needed.

Michael was a smart student. He was particularly good at math and science even from a young age.



Michael's verbal skills were amazing. He could hear a song and almost immediately recite it back word for word. With his fast-talking, he showed signs of being a great rapper someday.

These skills were as much a benefit as they were a curse. Without thinking, Michael often used his quick wit and tongue to say things that hurt others. With a lack of verbal self-control, he became labeled as a smart ass. He continued to act this way throughout his life, even though it hurt him every step of the way.



I am glad I never had his verbal skills. I had a speech deficiency when growing up. To this day, there are still many words I can't pronounce correctly. As a result, I learned to think about what I would say before speaking, making sure that I only used words I knew I could pronounce. This extra time also allowed me to think about how those on the receiving end might interpret my words. I believe I had the better gift of the two.



## CHAPTER 3

### GOD -WHAT DID YOU DO TO HIM?

#### *In The Beginning...*

From the time he was born till the end, there was nothing easy about raising Michael. My wife Carol had a difficult delivery. Michael should have been born on October 9th, but he made her wait one more tough day. The doctor gave her an epidural for pain relief but later removed it because the lax in pain was hindering the birth.

I felt terrible, as the worst was yet to come for her. The doctor was done messing around. He wanted, and for good reason, to get the show on the road. He removed the epidural and gave her Pitocin, which sharply increased the pain and accelerated the birth. She was in so much pain I didn't have the nerve to tell her to breathe as she learned in our Lamaze class. Breathing just didn't do the trick.

We finally made it to the delivery room. The doctors were so focused upon the final pushing they didn't notice the monitor which showed Michael was not receiving oxygen. Fortunately, I pointed this out to the doctors who looked frightened when they saw what I saw. It was clear by their reaction they messed up. They immediately stopped the pushing and proceeded with no further issues.

During this time, I was frightened that losing oxygen could damage his brain. Would he have been born with mental deficiencies if I wasn't there? I still thank God for bringing my eyes to the oxygen monitor just in time. Maybe God was showing me he was honoring my prayers.

When Michael came out, he looked blue and lifeless. I became very concerned—I did not see a single sign of movement. Then the

Doctor cut the umbilical cord at which time our son blasted out the cry of life. At last, our 8 lbs., 4oz son was born on 10-10-80.

After we came home from the hospital, the poor little guy was in so much pain. He just cried all the time. He suffered from colic during his first month, and I wasn't sure who I felt worse for: him or his mother. My mom said her firstborn had three-month colic, yet she took her chances with five more babies.

Carol had always been a very optimistic person and was a major reason I married her. But now she appeared tired, discouraged and exasperated. Besides Michael's cries and screams, she was not producing enough milk when nursing. It was a tough time for all of us.

Just a few months into Michael's life, my dad arranged a trip from San Diego (where we lived) to Columbus, OH (home of my family) to surprise my mom for Christmas. We agreed to come but were very concerned. Michael was a crier—a loud and persistent crier.

Boarding the plane, Michael did not disappoint. It was the longest trip of my life. We felt so sorry for the passengers around us. They endured 4 hours of screaming that just never ended.

I'm sure Michael's ears were in pain due to the altitude. But, you can't tell a two-month-old to chew gum or to open up his mouth to release the pressure from his eardrums for relief. Thank God we had a lovely airline stewardess. She walked him up and down the aisle of the plane for some time sharing Michael's Christmas Carols for all to enjoy.

### ***Barry Manilow and His Miracle***

The trip was worth it. Mom was so excited she cried as well, but this time it was from Christmas joy. Michael, however, was not into the Christmas festivities. No matter what we did for him, he showed his discontentment by continuing to scream and cry.

Unexpectedly, I discovered that Michael calmed down almost immediately when I put my headphones (from a cassette player) to his ears. To my surprise, Michael was a big fan of Barry Manilow. His songs calmed Michael down. I guess Barry's song "*It's a*

*Miracle*” was indeed a miracle for us. As an adult, I told Michael about his favorite singer. He denied it fervently.

As a baby, he seemed to show great promise of becoming an engineer. Engineers test to failure, and Michael was always testing me along with every coach, every teacher, and every boss he would ever have. He always wanted to see how far he could push the envelope even though this behavior worked against him throughout his entire life.

### ***Testing Dad***

When Michael was just two years old, he wanted a popsicle. I said, “*Okay, but eat it in the kitchen, away from the carpeted family room, or I’ll take it away.*” Just as soon as I said this, he snuck over, put his foot on the carpet, and moved it back. I took that popsicle and threw it over my backyard into the canyon below. He didn’t seem to care that he lost his popsicle; I think he just wanted to see if I would follow through.

Once when he was in diapers, he wet himself, and I could see he needed to be changed. He said, “*No!*” and held the diaper tightly around him. I gently but forcibly removed it and he had a fit. I left him for just a minute to get a clean diaper. When I returned, he was standing on my bed urinating on it.

Then there was the time he ruined our carpet with grape juice. We were trying to minimize his intake of the sugar in the juice. I said nicely to him that he had enough grape juice and gave him some other drink. I had just come home from working the midnight shift and went to bed. My visiting brother was watching him while I got a few hours’ sleep.

Dosing off, I heard Michael call from outside my bedroom door, saying, “*Daddy, Daddy.*” I got up and opened the door, and there he was holding a large glass of grape juice. He had conned my brother into giving it to him. I looked at Michael and calmly said, “*I told you no grape juice.*” He looked at me right in the eye and turned the glass 180 degrees, spilling the entire drink on our light gold carpet.

This little fiasco cost us a lot of money; we had to replace the light gold carpet, which was a continual run throughout the living room, dining room, the stairway, and the hallway upstairs.

### ***Anger to Danger***

I think I've made my point. Michael always tested me and everyone else throughout his life. He also tested himself by seeing how much liquor and drugs he could ingest for maximum pleasure with no consequences. We all know how that test ended.

This testing, in some way, was tied to his anger. Michael always seemed angry and at war with someone from the very beginning. He just came to earth with this disposition and it bothered me a lot. I used to look up to the sky and ask, "*God, where did this kid come from?*"

His anger was a warning of what was to come. If I could do it all over, I would have found some treatment and/or therapy to arrest his anger. It proved to be a significant factor in his demise. If you place the letter "D" in front of the word "anger," you get "Danger," which is what Michael's anger foretold.

### ***Animals and Their Calming Effect***

Animals had a soothing effect on Michael, especially when he was sad. Michael and his sister Nicole, loved animals. When the kids were old enough, I got them hamsters. Unfortunately, hamsters don't live too long, which was always a bummer. Once, it appeared our hamster was having trouble breathing, and it seemed as if the little guy was dying. To preserve him, I gave the hamster mouth to mouth resuscitation through a straw. The kids watched anxiously to see if my CPR might work. It didn't, but we gave it our all.

Dogs were good for the whole family. For Nicole's birthday gift, we let her get a dog. We each had a special relationship with our little Maltese whom Nicole named "*Rambo.*" Michael was exceptionally good at teaching Rambo many tricks. He and his sister taught him to sit, beg, stand, speak, lay down, roll over, and even play dead. Watching him play dead was my favorite because regardless of how still his body was, his tail was still going a mile a minute—a "*dead*" giveaway. But something else was special about their relationship.

When Michael was down, Rambo would cuddle up with him on his bed, which turned out to be good therapy for him. Animals seemed to calm him down and bring the best out of him.



When Michael got married, he bought two small dogs that just went crazy over him. When he came home, they would run in circles around him, and he himself would join in the celebration. It looked like a reunion of best friends. Like Rambo, he trained them to perform the same tricks. Michael connected with dogs. He was like the “*Dog Whisperer.*”



*He even took his dog to help him at work*

I wish he had become a veterinarian. He loved animals, and they seemed to love him in return. It also would have been a career in which he couldn't argue with his patients. Kids also brought out the best in Michael. When Michael was in Malawi on a missionary trip, the kids climbed all over him for his attention as he performed his gymnastic feats for them, which is illustrated in Chapter five to follow.





## CHAPTER 4

### WE WERE VERY CLOSE

I have so many good memories of Michael when he was young. One memory that sticks with me to this day is when Michael and I returned from a long day of playing at one of the parks we often visited. Afterward, it was time for his nap, so I changed his diaper and took him upstairs to lay him down in his crib.

As I was leaving the room, he stood up and gestured for me to come over to him. He reached over and just hugged me, and then he laid down to rest. I remember it so well because it never happened again. He wanted me to know we were pals.

To give another perspective of our relationship, I picked Michael up from nursery school in the early afternoon. The teacher told me he had fallen and scraped his knee earlier that day. She told me that he is the only child who calls for his daddy when he gets hurt. We were tight.

When Nicole was old enough to run, I used to come home at nights looking puzzled. I would look straight at the kids and say out loud, *“What did I forget to do today—I know I forgot something?”* Suddenly, I would exclaim, *“I remember now. I forgot to spank my kids!”* at which time they would laugh and run away from me as if I were the big bad wolf.

Michael was almost three years older than Nicole, but when she was old enough, Michael and I took her everywhere we went—and often. Because of my midnight work shift and Carol’s daytime shift, we split the time up time with the kids, allowing me to enjoy them during the day.

Thank God we had annual passes to the San Diego Zoo, the Wild Kingdom, and Sea World. We used them all just about every week.

Living in San Diego, we would often drive to the ocean to fish. We would load up my trunk with reels and rods and head to the ocean piers where we dropped our lines. Michael loved to catch fish but was ecstatic when he brought up other sea creatures like a baby octopus.

We used to look into every fisherman's bucket to see what they had caught, which was always a treat for all of us. Nicole was very young at the time and seemed happy just cutting up the bait. She used to pray for the worms to receive Jesus before she chopped them in half. These were just great times together.

Due to my job, I was required to move from CA to St. Louis, MO. Michael and I drove east to the "*Show Me State*" while Carol and Nicole flew there. Nicole wanted to go with us as she always did. She cried so much and loud when she learned she wouldn't be joining us on this venture. As much as I wanted to include her, she was just too young.

It would be just me and Michael; it was our big road trip together. We went to Las Vegas and made fun of people losing money and we saw the car that Bonnie and Clyde got shot in. From there, we went to the Grand Canyon, Bryce Canyon, and Zion Canyon. We hiked up some of them and took mule rides up when it was too steep to walk.

One night, we stayed at a cheap hotel, and there was a tremendous lightning storm. It was amazing and so beautiful. I have never seen anything like it in my entire life to this day. Lightning struck all around our hotel, and we thought it might hit our room. Michael was up most of the night just watching the show. After that night, he considered becoming a Meteorologist until he learned how low their salaries were.

Another night, we camped outside in Colorado, and I remember both of us were so impressed by how clear and bright the stars were. Michael loved everything about Colorado, including the landscape and especially the mountains. He loved it so much that later in life he returned to challenge the Colorado mountains with his snowboard—something he loved and was quite good at.



Up to this time, we had a wonderful relationship. In St. Louis, we would mountain bike, go to the batting cages, and he would play sports while I just enjoyed watching him. Things began to unravel during his junior year of high school. Once he was a senior, we lost our bond we once had and we never got it back.



## CHAPTER 5

### GOD

It was important to me that our kids understood and appreciated our faith by seeing firsthand where Christianity was hard at work. I wanted them to meet people on the front lines by taking them on mission trips. As much as Michael berated people and institutions throughout his life, it was not so in matters of his faith.

Michael was fortunate to have met some of my missionary friends. For about eight years, I was a board member of a grassroots organization, “*Children of the Nations International*,” founded by Chris and Debbie Clark. Michael was genuinely impressed to learn these two brave souls were (and are to this day) building orphanages and schools in some of the poorest places and hottest war zones in Africa.

Not too long ago, Sierra Leone was in a civil war (1991 – 2002) where children were kidnapped and turned into drug-crazed animals who chopped off peoples’ limbs for no rhyme nor reason. If you don’t about this senseless war, I would recommend watching the movie “*Blood Diamonds*” starring Leo DiCaprio. Unlike many Hollywood movies, this one was a very accurate portrayal of what happened during this cruel civil war.

While people were fleeing from their country to escape from the war, the Clarks were doing the opposite. They were traveling there to continue building their largest orphanage to date, and miraculously completed it during the war’s peak.

Conventional wisdom would lead one to believe the rebels would have either destroyed the orphanage or taken it over as one of their torture sites. But miraculously, they left it alone. Soon after the

building was completed, the place was filled with orphans; many of who lost their parents in the war.

Michael also met and befriended my other friends from Sierra Leone—our pastor, Gus Davies, and his beautiful wife Jeneba. The Clarks introduced us to them and the Davies became good friends with our family. Gus ministered to our family as though it was his own. He was at Michael's side through thick and thin and did everything he could to support him. He would later be the presiding pastor at Michael's memorial service.

As fate would have it, I met another godly man, Kojo Carew, when I visited Sierra Leone. Later, he too became important to Michael. Kojo and his wife Lynette, were the only two medical doctors who remained in Sierra Leone during the civil war to tend to the wounded on both sides of the conflict. By loving their enemies, he hoped to change them. Stories of Dr. Kojo Carew and his wife are legendary in Africa. I had the privilege of raising funds for him to rebuild his hospital that the rebels bombed during the war.

Later, Kojo's family was granted refuge in the United States during the Ebola breakout in Sierra Leone. Dr. Kojo didn't stay long. Although his wife and sons remained in the States, he went back to Sierra Leone to treat those stricken with Ebola.

When Michael met Kojo, it was like watching two men destined for friendship. Their conversations were mature, sophisticated and they both wanted to save the world together. Michael was taken by my friends, who later became his friends. They made him a better person.

To see poverty up close and personal, I took our whole family to Malawi for a two-week mission trip. Malawi has received a lot of positive attention from celebrities such as Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie. Malawi, to this day, is populated with over a million orphans due to the AIDS virus, but I felt safe taking them to Malawi. There was no war there, and my kids were unlikely to be infected by AIDS.

Michael and Nicole learned so much on this trip. They saw firsthand how much of the world suffers from starvation and poverty—seeing such plights upfront changed them. They became aware of the

world's condition and their place and responsibility to make it better for all.

Michael and Nicole seemed so happy in Malawi. Nicole had the place rocking to her music which she brought from the States and taught them to dance to them. In return, the orphans taught her some music and dances of their own.

The kids swarmed and jumped all over Michael, wanting more of his time and attention. They wanted him to teach them how to do flips and other gymnastic feats he had mastered.



One day, my kids starred in an outdoor play in some remote village. They enacted a biblical parable of the unfaithful and fearful shepherd who slept as a wolf stole sheep for its dinner. The cowardly shepherd, played by Nicole, fell asleep, at which time the big bad wolf snatched a sheep (one orphan) away for his dinner. Guess who played the big bad wolf.



The boys loved to play soccer with Michael. We brought brand new soccer balls to give to the kids. Both Nicole and Michael were immersed in an experience that enhanced their faith and lives. I am so glad we took that trip. It made them better people.



## CHAPTER 6

### SOCIAL INJUSTICE

Another event changed Michael's life for the better occurred when we were living in St. Louis. During this time, Michael befriended an African American boy named Jason. They were in sixth grade together at the time and were a lot of fun to be around. Once, they dressed up as girls with large pillows enlarging their bosoms where they danced up a storm. With pom poms and wigs, they gave us quite a show.



For personal reasons, Jason's mother moved outside of the school district. When the Principal of the school heard they had moved, the Principal (clearly prejudiced) saw this as a way to push Jason out from her school forcing him to attend a less desirable one within his new district. The Principal wouldn't even allow Jason to finish out the school year and with only about two months left. This racial response angered our family and we did something about it.

My wife took on the school to keep Jason where he was. With the strong support of our entire family and the trust of Jason's mother,

we obtained a “*Power of Attorney*,” giving us temporary custody of Jason who lived with us, off and on, allowing him to finish out the school year with Michael.

I remember playing basketball in my back yard with the boys while Jason was living with us. To my surprise, several neighbors (in an affluent neighborhood) would occasionally yell out the “N” word, which really upset Michael. These experiences in St. Louis made our kids more sensitive to racial injustice and taught them to fight the good fight when given the opportunity.

This story of Jason only gets better—much better. Jason made the big times. He plays a major character, John LaMarr, in the TV comedy series “*Orville*.” He has appeared in movies including “*Inside the CIA*,” and is a professional pianist who performs live in California. Most recently, he starred as the lead actor in the movie “*A typical Wednesday*.” Michael would be so proud.

### ***Beatitude of Righteousness***

There is one Beatitude in the gospel of Matthew that reminds me of Michael every time I read it: “*Blessed are they who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be satisfied.*” If Michael was asked what disturbed him the most, he would most certainly rattle off a number of injustices tolerated in our world.

When he saw bosses, coaches, teachers, or anyone in authority abusing their power and treating himself or his friends unfairly, Michael became the Vigil Annie for righteousness. Unfairness made him very angry, and he fought against it throughout his life. As well-intended as he was to fight injustice, his response tactics were often self-defeating, harming not only his foe but himself as well.



I jokingly compare Michael to Samson of the Old Testament. They were both hotheads who sought to bring swift revenge upon their rivals.

When Sampson was mistreated by the Philistines, he punished them severely, killing them in large numbers. Later, Samson was caught by his enemy after his strength left him following an untimely haircut. The Philistines then caught up with him and plucked out his eyes.

In the end, Sampson would get his final revenge. After God returned Sampson's strength to him, he found his opportunity to destroy the Philistines who had been taunting him inside their temple of the pagan god Dagon.

Although blind, Sampson found himself between two weight-bearing columns and pulled them out from their foundation bringing the temple down upon the heads of all those in attendance. He and many Philistines died from the collapse. He killed more Philistines on that day than he had previously throughout his lifetime.

Similarly, Michael would take his revenge on his foes by puncturing tires, scratching the sides of cars, spray painting sides of houses, etc. As strong as the two of them were, they were not strong enough to control their anger which eventually contributed to their deaths.



## CHAPTER 7

### SPORTS AS AN ADOLESCENT

Up to this point, Michael's life was going pretty well. Now it is time for me to retrace my steps to see what else was going on behind the scene. What other events or activities shaped Michael's life? Sports!

This chapter is long, but it needs to be. Much of how Michael evolved was through sports and he isn't alone. Here, he experienced the worst of coaches and players. He felt the sting of the politics as parents worked with coaches behind their backs in order to bench those who threatened their kids' position.

Sports began when Michael was very young as he was showing signs of being naturally athletic. As parents, we always tried to place our kids in activities that complemented their God-given gifts. As a toddler, we enrolled him in tumbling classes. From there, he became a gymnast.

#### *Gymnastics*

Michael was a good gymnast and could have been much better had he wanted to.



Unfortunately, his coaches were always pushing him to work harder and harder and with an intensity a young child should not experience. They used all the wrong tactics which over only soured his relationships with them—and he began to fight back.

If his coaches were jerks to him, he showed them how he could be a bigger jerk back. If they mistreated him or one of his friends (a huge mistake), he found a way to strike back. If his coaches used negative reinforcement techniques to get results out of him, he would retaliate with a lackluster performance during tournaments. At such a young age, he began to master the art of passive aggression and later of vengeance.

Unfortunately, Michael learned so many inappropriate ways to deal with conflict during his formative years. During these years, these behaviors seemed to become hardwired inside his brain. When dealing with conflict as an adult, he went right back to those imbedded tactics he learned as a kid.

What these coaches never figured out is that Michael wasn't complicated. He just wanted the coaches to treat him and his friends fairly. If they had, he would have given them 110%. Unfortunately, they failed to see the obvious.

When he got to high school, he wanted to quit gymnastics. At this time, his gymnastic coaches wanted Michael to train five days a week. With school and training, he wouldn't have a chance to be a kid like his friends. I agreed with his decision.

Gymnastic training was strenuous and difficult, but it made him strong and well-coordinated, which proved beneficial to him when trying out for other sports soon thereafter. As he got older, he discovered that his gymnastic training allowed him to excel in any sport he chose to pursue.

Unfortunately, he later came to believe his gymnastics training stunted his growth and blamed his parents for the outcome. No matter how many scientific studies I showed him to debunk the myth that gymnastics causes one to be shorter, he refused to believe them. Instead, he remained angry about it throughout his life

## ***Baseball***

Michael began playing baseball at a very young age and was fortunate to have found a good coach during his first years in the sport. He was kind to every kid on the roster. As mentioned earlier, if you treated him and his teammates fairly, he would give you all he had and more. I first saw this play out on one of the hottest days of the year in St. Louis.



There was a little league baseball tournament in St. Louis. For his team to win first place in the competition, they had to win the next three games. I remember this day so well because Michael had broken his finger and should not have played well if at all.

For some reason, he was determined to win the tournament that day come hell or high water. This tournament was single elimination where you go home if you lose. Deep down, I quietly hoped that Michael's team would lose so we could go back to our air-conditioned house. But that was not to be.

During this tournament, I saw Michael's leadership for the first time. He took charge. He was pumping up his teammates, convincing them they could win it. They won the next two games, qualifying them to play for the championship game.

Towards the end of the last game, when all the other pitchers' arms had given out, Michael took the mound. He ended it with the victory (and with a broken finger). The kids on the team were amazed. They pulled it off and went home with 1st place trophies.



I stress this story for two reasons. 1) It proved to me how vital fairness and kindness were to Michael. His coach was a good guy, and Michael rewarded him for it. 2) He was developing into a leader.

Unfortunately, baseball got uglier as time went on. Looking back, playing baseball may have done more psychological and emotional damage to Michael than any other sport or event he ever encountered.

Playing baseball ceased to be fun over time. Even for such young children, baseball teams were formed by the parents, who strategically selected coaches to ensure their own kids got to play more than others. If you weren't in the parents' clique (and didn't have the ear of the coach), your kid would not get a fair shot and would be benched much more than he deserved.

When Michael was a Junior in high school while still living in St. Louis, he played varsity baseball at Parkway East. He played second base, but he found himself on the second team even when he was much better than his competition. The one who beat Michael out for the position was not another kid; it was the father of his competition who beat Michael out.

The father had a relationship with the coach, which resulted in Michael watching most games from the dugout. Michael was quickly learning how politics worked, and he didn't like it. It was unfair.

One reason the parents pushed so hard for their kids to play all nine innings was to display their kids when University and Major League Baseball scouts came to town. As the kids entered their Junior and Senior years in high school, the parents bragged about all the college scholarship offers that were on their way. It wasn't just a matter of *getting* scholarships, it was about how many they would reject. These kids were being set up.

To be fair though, and to my surprise, some kids were getting scholarship offers. Some were given a one-time \$500 reduction on their tuition if they would attend a junior college that nobody had ever heard of before. You had to hope these parents had savings put aside for the college years, but I doubt it. Most of the parents were



proud, blue-collar, beer-drinking, tobacco chewers living paycheck to paycheck.

There is something much better than a baseball scholarship and Michael attained it. He received a full 5-year academic scholarship from the University of Florida *for being smart*.

I have a very close friend who has a gifted child-athlete. Like so many parents, he believed if his child excelled in a sport, he could obtain a four-year paid college scholarship.

Being an engineer, my friend applied a lifecycle cost analysis to calculate all of the expenses associated with his child's sport. It included the costs of uniforms as well as fees for referees, fields, and gym access. He included the costs of family travel to watch his child play in-state and out-of-state competitions where only the "best" players were allowed to compete. These costs include travel and hotel expenses.

When everything was added up, he estimated he had spent over \$40,000—and climbing. His boss had two very gifted athletes who played soccer, and he also spent a ton of money for the allusive college scholarship. Both of them now realize they have spent more money on their teaser sports than it would have cost to send their child to an excellent state college for four years.

### ***Dad Blew It***

Now it is my turn to confess. At one time, I was one of those parents during Michael's baseball experience. Not as extreme, but yes. I messed up.

During his teen years, Michael found an excellent team to play with. The coach was a genuine, good-hearted man always encouraging the kids and putting their interest ahead of the scoreboard. This team was in the Red division, which was one step down from the Blue division (the highest).

Michael was having a lot of fun on this team, but I thought he deserved to be in the Blue division. In my selfishness (there's no other way to put it), I found one Blue Team that would take him. The coach turned out to be the worst of the worst. He took delight

in putting kids down and he didn't like Michael. It was a terrible year that only got worse because of me.

After the regular season, this coach solicited high-level players to play at an international tournament in Puerto Rico. He approached me and others to sign our kids up. I don't remember the exact cost, but I think it was about \$800.00. I was hesitant because he had not given Michael much playtime during the regular season; however, he assured me Michael would play a lot. I fell for it.

I didn't go to Puerto Rico at first because of my work demands and the costs. When the kids got there, Michael and one of his friends were not playing. They left the team. The friend's parents called me and told me what had happened and that the two boys were now having a great time playing in the ocean.

I was so angry that I flew to Puerto Rico to intervene. I faced that coach at the hotel bar and wanted to fight the SOB. He told me he offered Michael plenty of playtime, but he refused. I was confused until he told me all Michael had to do was to lie about his age.

Michael's coach had two teams; one for kids Michael's age, and another for younger kids. He said Michael would have had lots of opportunities to play with the younger players who were short like him (ouch). All Michael had to do was lie and cheat.

If it hadn't been for another adult who got between us, Michael's coach and I would have found ourselves in a fist fight that night. He calmed both of us down and promised Michael would play (1 or 2 games left) with his peers.

I wrongfully thought it was essential to teach Michael to stand up and persevere, and I thought getting back playing ball would somehow make him a seasoned adult (like me?) Michael got one hit, but I'm not sure if it was single or a double. That is how unimportant the game was; I don't even remember.

Michael didn't want to go back to play with the team, but he did it for me. He was having too much fun learning how to surf. He and his friend were the smart ones. To this day, I regret my actions. I should have let him enjoy the waves with his friend.

Parents, learn from my mistakes. Let your kids have fun while they are young—they only get one shot at it.

### ***Coaches' Impact Upon a Child***

The first time most parents turn their child over to someone else is for sports. This “*turning over*” often occurs at a very young age. Organized Tee Ball and dancing can begin for children as young as three years of age.

These young children will for the first time in their lives, witness the importance society places on competition and winning—not to mention the shame of losing.

It is also a time when they become exposed to the practice of sorting and weeding out those less gifted. During this period, these young minds are encouraged to discriminate, which is only reinforced by parents of the “*elite*”. Parents with the most talented children began to consolidate and plot how to keep their special kids together, recruit the best coaches, and distinguish their kids from others by creating different levels of competition.

To visibly shame those who are not considered the “*best of the best*,” they are given different uniforms and hats to define their inferior position. Essentially, they wear a scarlet letter, and some of them wear it for a lifetime.

I was one of those players. I was a late-bloomer and didn't physically mature as fast as those wearing the “*important uniforms*.” It wasn't until I was a Junior in high school that I caught up with them, but by that time, the dye was cast.

At that point, I had little to no fair chance of competing with those already in the arena. My own scarlet letter didn't fall off until I moved to a different state in my twenties. There, no one knew me for being a late bloomer giving me an equal playing field to pursue my dreams.

Why are sports activities for the young so impactful? It is because they occur during those formative years alluded to earlier. It is these years when good and bad behaviors become imprinted into their psyches and are rarely ever challenged, even into adulthood. Those

formative years become the foundation kids build upon. This is why it is so important to find mature coaches during these early years.

There are plenty of immature adults who are motivated to behave inappropriately by watching and mimicking the behavior of college and NFL coaches. So often, coaches swear, jump up and down like a spoiled kid, and even berate their athletes on national television.

Yes—young children are exposed to all sorts of lousy coaches, promoting inappropriate behavior and language in the name of sports.

Coaches are not teachers. Teachers are accountable to rules of conduct, and if they behave in a way that violates them, they are reprimanded for the same behaviors that are routine and found acceptable on the playing fields.

I saw this up close when Michael played baseball out of town and the team stayed at a hotel during their tournament. I learned the head coach was the biggest kid of all. He was watching inappropriate TV, drinking, and just laughing as the kids behaved in a manner that would never be tolerated at school or at home.

What a double standard our kids are exposed to. In one environment, inappropriate behavior is prohibited, and in another, it's encouraged. In effect, our youth experience a type of "*social schizophrenia*." It should be no surprise that kids are confused about what is right or wrong, especially when wrong is often considered "*cool*" by peers and is necessary to be part of the popular crowd.

There should be tools to inform parents about the person they entrust their kids to. We have tools on the internet, such as Yelp, that rank and give reviews on virtually everything. Had I had such a tool, I would never have turned Michael over to those coaches who belittled him and encouraged him to swear and even cheat when possible.

It's time for a regional Internet review forum to rank coaches for all ages. I can't think of a better way to weed out bad coaches than to hang their dirty laundry out for the whole world to see on the Internet.

Parents, don't turn your child over to an adult coach whom you know nothing about. It's your job to protect your kids from the bad coaches who are capable of damaging your sons and daughters in more ways than one.

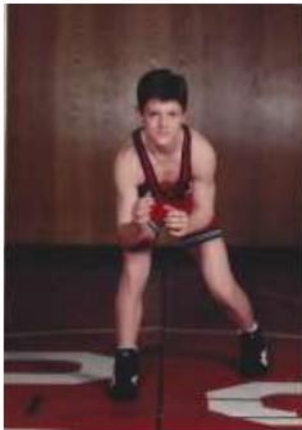
Don't blow it as I did. And when you find a good coach volunteering their time to nurture your child, show them your appreciation. Let the community know what a wonderful mentor they are, and rank them with 5 stars on the Internet. And, don't forget them at Christmas.



## CHAPTER 8

### SPORTS IN HIGH SCHOOL

Two sports which didn't discriminate against height were wrestling and diving; Michael could have been exceptional in both but he just didn't have the passion for them.



#### *Wrestling*

When Michael was still at Parkway East, he tried out for and easily made the varsity wrestling team. I forgot his exact weight class, but it was low, and no one in his weight class could beat him. They decided to lose or gain weight knowing they'd never compete at meets if they had to take on Michael first.

As Michael continued growing, he moved up to the next higher weight class. Like before, the kids in that bracket either lost weight or gained weight to avoid competing with him.

At one wrestling meet, Michael (who was only in his first year of wrestling) was matched up with one of the best wrestlers in the State of Missouri. I was out of town, but I heard it was like watching two

gladiators fighting to the death. Almost having been pinned several times, Michael finally flipped his opponent and pinned him with only seconds left on the clock.

My wife, who was in attendance, described the event as one of the most anxious moments of her life. She found herself vicariously fighting off Michael's opponent by using her arms to push him off Michael from her chair. I regret missing this once-in-a-lifetime performance. I heard from a friend of mine who was at the meet. He told me it one of the most memorable fights he'd ever witnessed.

But Michael didn't care for the sport or his coach (again) and quit. I didn't blame him for quitting because he didn't like the sport, but I hoped he would finish out the season. It pained me to see him quit again. It was becoming a pattern.

### ***Diving***

At school one day, Michael was showing off at the indoor swimming pool. Using his gymnastic skills, he impressed the girls by executing challenging dives. The girls were not the only ones impressed. The diving coach saw him and was amazed. She approached Michael about joining the diving team, but he wasn't interested and said, "*no thank you.*"

For one thing, he wouldn't wear a speedo, but she did some checking and told him he wouldn't have to wear one. He was still not interested. She then spoke to me, begging me to convince him to compete. She promised me she would get Michael a full scholarship at any Big Ten College of his choice if he just joined the team. That sounded great to me. I spoke to Michael about this great opportunity but he wanted nothing of it.

### ***Moving to Florida***

When I relocated from St. Louis to Orlando for my job, Michael was ending his Junior Year at high school in St. Louis. With only one year left, we thought it would be wise to send him to a small private school in Orlando so he would have a better chance to make friends and fitting in. We did, and he loved it. His grades were excellent, and his new fellow students saw him as smart, talented, and cool.



At Fairfax Preparatory High School, Michael also found the school's athletics department inviting. Peers embraced him and urged Michael to join the football team and later the baseball team.

### ***Touchdown***

Michael did not like football as much as other sport and he didn't want to get hurt. Michael was one of the players whose job was to tackle an opponent receiving the ball during kickoffs. After the kick, he did everything to *look* as if he was trying to tackle the ball runner by jumping on him after the tackle.

He never got a chance to run or catch the ball until one night. Michael was the halfback, and on a trick play, he got the ball and made a touchdown. He was thrilled he made a touchdown, and that there would always be a record of it.

Michael was more interested in finding ways to make his teammates laugh than he was in playing football. A friend of Michael's described one of his many antics during a football game as follows.



*“One away game, Michael hadn't been playing, and he decided he was going to make himself look like he had played the whole game. He smeared mud all over his white jersey and stuck a piece of sod on his face mask to look like he got tackled. It was a funny moment, even though our coach didn't find it amusing.”*

Soon thereafter, the coach cut Michael from the team for goofing around too much. Unfortunately, Michael seemed happy about it; he thought it made him look like a tough guy.

Even though Michael was not the best football player on the team, he was better than any of the cheerleaders as stated by one of his teammates below.

*“When reflecting with other members of the 1999 TPS cheerleading squad, the same memory came to mind for us all. Mike had a mean standing back tuck! I think we first saw him demonstrate this during a powder-puff football game. All of the cheerleaders were jealous of his acrobatic abilities and his contagious smile.”*



Another one of his friends wrote us the following.

*“I remember lining up across from Mike during JV football for WR/CB drills during his short-lived but legendary football career. He was so smart, witty, and cool. So much so that he got kicked off the team for his antics. The coach thought he was a distraction, but he was the real spirit of the team. Primetime!”*

### **Homerun**

Michael also made the varsity baseball team. To no surprise, he and the coach did not get along. During one game, the coach told Michael not to swing for the fence. He just wanted him to get on base so the big players could bring him home.

Of course, Michael interpreted this as the coach calling him out for being short. In response, he got up and hit one over the fence. The team went wild even though his coach was angry. Michael, however, was so happy that he had bragging rights for scoring a touchdown *and* now for hitting a home run.

I became increasingly concerned. Michael was quitting or being cut by his coaches too often, and usually as a result of him disrespecting

his coaches. Michael had a bad attitude towards coaches. Granted, he didn't always have the best coaches, but he didn't know when to shut up. Michael continued this immature behavior into his adult life. Emotionally, he never grew up as it pertained to managing conflict. Instead of managing conflict, he was more often the cause of it.

### ***Peter Pan***

I used to get so frustrated with Michael over his destructive behavior. I begged him to try working through issues maturely. Sometimes, I just wanted to shake him hoping something would break free so that he would grow up, but he never did.

In the movie Peter Pan, there is a song titled “*I Won't Grow Up.*” There was a part of Michael that never grew up. Instead of working through conflicts, he resorted to his childhood responses; those he learned so well during his formative years and which always worked against him.

My wife grew up with alcoholism in her family and she has a theory, and I think she is right. She believes when emotionally immature teenagers begin and continue to drink at the age of i.e. 16, they emotionally remain at this age for their lifetimes. That is what happened to Michael. Emotionally, he was always 16 and it showed and worked against him as an adult. It is my belief; it was the cause of him failing to work out problems maturely as he grew older.

Michael continued calling people names, getting in fights, and demonstrating his masculinity by arm wrestling at the local bar.

### ***Idle Hands Are the Devil's Workshop***

No longer participating in organized sports, or in any productive activities, Michael had way too much time on his hands during summer breaks. With no real structure, he began to hang around kids who were all too happy to introduce him to drinking and drugs.

As a parent, I should have made sure that his free time after school and during summer break included enriching activities such as drama, chess, music, science clubs, or the debate club. Too much idle time and a handful of juveniles with no constructive goals is a recipe for disaster.

Maybe I should have found him a summer job— preferably one he would not like. Maybe his disappointment with the job and one which only paid minimum wage would motivate him to work harder in school to earn himself a dream job that he was passionate about.

By not working during his free time, he lost an opportunity to understand the value of money early on and how to save and invest it wisely. As he got older, Michael failed to grasp the importance of paying back his student loans and didn't think it essential to file his tax returns with the IRS.

Mom and Dad would not let him mess around with the IRS. We interceded to make sure his tax returns were correctly filled out and submitted. Every year, we wrestled out of Michael all his necessary financial information in order for us to turn it over to our accountant. Michael did pay for the tax services; he just fought it every step of the way. This made life more difficult than it had to be for himself and us. Michael wanted to test even the IRS?

## CHAPTER 9

### NEW FRIENDS AND HIGH ROLLERS

Free from organized sports and coaches, Michael discovered he loved anything with wheels. I saw this attraction when he was just six years old when he became the proud owner of his first skateboard. When we lived in San Diego, he would perform skateboard maneuvers that looked so easy; so easy in fact that I asked him to let me borrow it to show him a trick or two.

I remember him handing me the board with hesitation and genuine concern about my wellbeing. I still remember him telling me it might not be a good idea, as I might get hurt. I smiled and told him *“Just watch, kid.”*

He did watch as I immediately fell hard on our driveway. He was quick to help me up and reminded me I should have listened to him. I thought it was so funny being scolded by a six-year-old who was concerned about his dad getting hurt.

Throughout his life, he skateboarded. He loved it and eventually took it to a whole new level. When not playing organized sports, he found and introduced himself to the skateboard community. Once others saw Michael’s skills on his board, they immediately befriended him. They, like him, were thrill-seekers.

His skateboard friends were of a different variety than he was used to. Unlike his fellow baseball playmates, these kids were different, which was just fine by him. That is one thing Michael and I had in common. We liked people of every persuasion, and our resume of friends clearly shows that; they enriched our lives.

His new skateboard buddies dressed and behaved differently than he was used to, and I believe, in reflection, he was learning more than just new skateboard tricks.

Some people described his skateboard pals as a sketchy bunch of drug users and loners. They didn't hang around with the popular/jock crowd who labeled them as weird, and they likely didn't care. They were adrenaline junkies, just like Michael, who risked bodily harm for a high as they grinded down rails and performed almost miraculously on half pipes.

Michael found out how dangerous skateboards were at 34 years of age. He ordered an electric skateboard online and called me at least twice a day to see if it had arrived. When it did, I called him at work and within minutes, he was home with his package. He had a big smile on his face as he unpacked the board, and it reminded me of how excited he was as kid unwrapping his Christmas gifts.

Once opened, he took the board out to the street and was immediately traveling at maximum speed. I was just amazed by how ridiculously easy it was for him. Not satisfied with its top speed, and being the curious and determined engineer that he was, he modified everything on the board to pick up speed. He soon bought several newer electric skateboards and placed them on his apartment walls as we do pictures.

Trying to set a world record for speed with his souped up electric skateboard, he was seriously injured and landed himself in the hospital. He didn't want me to know what happened until he was out of the hospital. Later, he showed me some pictures of his wounds, and they were quite severe. One of Michael's friends recorded a conversation with him about the incident:

*One-day Mike comes to my desk, limping and sipping a 12oz soda... "Hey Juan, what are you up too?" We chat away, and he tells me he had just purchased an electric skateboard or longboard of sorts...and explains to me that he was trying to break a speed record being pulled by a Golf Kart... apparently, he had lost control and ended up in the hospital because of his fall.*

*Funny thing is that if that was me, I would have given up on the board, though not Mike, he was up for more adrenaline.*

It wasn't just skateboards he was attracted to; he loved anything with wheels that rolled at maximum RPMs. He was amazing to watch on roller blades and gave quite a show to those watching.

BMX racing was another hobby of his. He competed in races and was eventually sponsored by a local bike shop, which just thrilled him. Mountain biking was another “wheeled” activity both of us enjoyed together. During one summer, we went mountain biking almost every weekend.



One Saturday, we were racing and jumping over dirt mounds to launch ourselves high over them, which was a lot of fun until somebody decided to cause harm. As I floated over an elevated mound of dirt, I tilted my bike in such a way that I would land safely upon the other side. But on that day, I was unaware someone had sabotaged the other side of the mound by digging a deep hole. Instead of landing on the other side at level grade, my bike descended at a downward angle into the hole.

I remember landing so hard into that hole at high speed. My body leaned into the handlebars, leaving me on the ground in deep pain and with fractured ribs. Michael came over as quickly as he could to help me up and back to the car.

The first thing I said to him was not to tell his mother, as she had just warned me how dangerous mountain biking was for someone my age. I did keep it from her for four days. When she saw I could hardly breathe, I confessed. She drove me to the doctor, who confirmed I severely broke three ribs.

When it came to cars, he never owned one that was fast enough for him. He modified his exhaust system and changed out computer chips on his VW GTI to go as fast as it could go. At one time, I let him borrow my Dodge Neon only to find out he had modified it for speed and entered race car events with it.

*He was born to fly on wheels—and he did just that*





## CHAPTER 10

### FAIRFAX PREPARATORY SCHOOL



If you asked Michael what his favorite year in school was, he would say his senior year at Fairfax Preparatory School in Orlando, FL hands down. This school was where the more affluent kids went and was somewhat foreign to Michael—but he loved it.

His new friends drove the best of cars, and their parents had boats and much more than we did. He was impressed by their lifestyles, and many friends graciously invited him to hang out with them. They and their parents embraced Michael, and—to his delight—he became their frequent dinner guest.

The kids loved Michael as much as he did them. He was smart, and the hardest classes for some of his friends were his easiest. Science and Math were his second language. Also, because of his athletic achievements and skills, he became a good-looking jock on top of being an ace student.

Michael became embarrassed about his old Toyota Corolla, which I bought for him in St. Louis. All his new friends, however, were

driving plush cars, which made his car stick out as the plainest one at Fairfax Prep's school parking lot. Since I would not buy him a fancy car, he did something that upset me, and something he repeated over and over again. He vandalized his own car in front of his friends in the school's parking lot. How cool was that? A kid walking on the top of his own car, denting it with his baseball cleats on. He decided to make a joke out of it, which, in his mind, showed his peers he was much cooler than his car.

I could tell he was trying his hardest to impress his new friends. I don't think Michael ever understood his friends liked him because of who he was. He didn't need to impress them with possessions. They also liked Michael for being the life of the parties. Naïve as I was, I didn't suspect these parties included alcohol and drugs. Stupid me.

During our move to Orlando, we were looking to buy a house. Michael was pressuring me to move to Winter Park where his new high school friends lived, but house prices there were through the roof. To buy into Winter Park, I would have to purchase a smaller home and take on more debt.

Instead, my wife and I found a perfect lot where we eventually built our dream home in the City of Winter Springs. It was our perfect house. It included a pool, a Jacuzzi, and a front lake view with a boat slip. It turned out our city of Winter Springs was a great place to live. Michael, over time, learned to love the wildlife, nature, and fishing at the lake just outside our front door—and soon, his friends liked it as well. We ended up with lots of company after all.

Looking back, I wonder if I made a mistake sending him to this prestigious Prep school. He changed a lot that year, and not for the better. Michael did things he knew I would not approve of, and he became deceitful by either hiding what he was doing or blatantly lying.

It is not difficult to understand what happened to our relationship from that point on. Michael's deception led us to become strangers. Our relationship became one of suspicion and distrust. He lied so much that I could never trust him as I had before. The good old days came to an end.

Although our relationship was on the decline, he found new ones with those of his own age and just as immature as he was. Michael kept up with many of them to the end. Following his death, many of his high school friends wrote to us, one testimony after another, of all the fun and special memories they have of him.

There are too many of these testimonies to put in this chapter. However, I selected the ones that captured Michael best and that meant so much to his family. They are (unedited) as follows:

- ❖ *Mike was outgoing, personable, the life of the party, and just a good dude. He was polite and gracious every time he hung out with my family. He was smart and funny, always obtaining laughs. He was always the best dancer in the room. He touched a lot of peoples' lives, as I've seen the outpouring of emotion and support from social media. He was loved and will truly be missed.*
- ❖ *I have thought about him daily since he passed and wish I had made more of an effort to see him when he moved back. He was one of the most genuine friends I've ever had. There was no pretense with Mike, and that made him an easy person to be friends with and get to know.*
- ❖ *The world is definitely laughing and smiling less now that Mike is gone, but I will always treasure my memories of him. Nicole - Mike would have been a great uncle (even though he would have definitely bought your son his first skateboard and fireworks), and I hope you tell Mike's nephew all about him. You had a wonderful son and brother, and I will always miss my friend.*
- ❖ *Michael would show up when I needed him, he would constantly make me laugh, he could get me to forgive with just a smile, and he could sing his heart out at the drop of a hat. During the first month we lived together, I lost two close friends within a week of each other. I was devastated. I*

*remember sitting on the couch one-night crying, and Mike came down the stairs. He sat down next to me and cried too. I was baffled at the time and felt like I should be comforting him, and I even got a little ruffled over it.*

- ❖ *Being with Mike was an adventure, full of unexpected twists and turns. We would do impromptu karaoke in the kitchen frequently, especially if one of us had had a bad day. And with Mike, I never felt self-conscious. He had a way about him that reassured me everything was okay. He was so generous, so kind, so big-hearted, so incredibly smart, and he was taken way too soon. I am so truly sorry for your loss; he was like a part of our family and we are all feeling the emptiness his loss has left.*

## CHAPTER 11

### TRUTH & CONSEQUENCES

It troubled me how frequently Michael began to lie to get out of trouble during his later high school years. It was the one sin I hated most and my kids knew it. I explained that lying changes the very character of a person, and once a person begins practicing the art of lying and deceit, it is very difficult to stop.

Unfortunately, Michael became an excellent liar, and he rarely suffered the consequences of his behavior. He took pride in the fact that he could do almost anything and escape punishment, including speeding and—believe it or not even driving drunk. I discovered he was stopped more than once by police for being intoxicated behind the wheel. Even then, he sweet-talked his way out through one lie or another.

I often wonder what would have happened to him had he gone to jail for every DUI he committed. Never having to face the consequences, his deceptive and dangerous behavior just intensified. One night while driving intoxicated, he drove over 100 mph in the wrong direction on a major 4-lane road without any collisions—and he got away with it. Never paying the price for DUIs and vehicle infractions just made him riskier and more dangerous behind the wheel. Where were the police when you needed them?

One lie he did not get away with occurred one night after he got his driver's license—just one day after his 16th birthday. He asked to borrow my car so he could go to his friend's house to study for a test. I told him no because it was pouring rain that evening and he wasn't an experienced driver. He was persistent, explaining he needed to study with his friend for this upcoming test and told me

he lived just a mile away. His persistence wore me down. And who can deny his son studying for a test?

About an hour later (around 10 pm), I was nodding off on the couch. I got a call from the Fire Department alerting me that my son was in a severe car accident. I was drowsy from just waking up. I told the Fireman he had the wrong number, because my son was just down the road studying with a friend.

The Fireman said, *“Is this the residence of Michael Christopher Cannell?”* That sure woke me up. I said, *“Yes, and is he all right?”* He said he was not at liberty to say. I said in a loud voice, *“IS HE OKAY?!”* He said he was sitting on the curb crying.

After a sigh of relief, I remember asking the Fireman, *“He was by himself, right?”* He replied *“No, there were three others in the car.”* As a condition to driving my car, he was not to drive with anyone else until I believed he was a more experienced driver. It is hard to describe how upset I was with his disregard of my only restriction putting three others in harm’s way.

Arriving at the scene of the accident, I saw my son sitting on the curb next to my *“totaled car.”* The first question I asked the officer was about the welfare of the passengers. He told me there were three others in the car. one other boy and two girls. One girl was not injured and was picked up by her father. The other girl and the boy were taken to the hospital by ambulance. The girl incurred several broken ribs. The young man was not injured; however, he had a crush on the wounded girl and thought the ambulance ride might lead to an opportunity for love.

The police inspector explained what happened. Michael was approaching an intersection facing a blinking red light. With the rain pouring down so hard, he panicked. Not knowing what to do, he stopped a second time directly under the traffic light instead of continuing through the intersection and just froze there.

As Michael was stopped in the intersection, a car that I believe was a 280Z was approaching my son’s car in the perpendicular direction. The driver was facing a yellow flashing light at an estimated velocity of 35 mph. He couldn’t stop in time to avoid the collision.

The officer showed me exactly where the point of impact occurred on my car. The 280Z's pointed front end struck just perfectly in the center of a structurally sound beam separating the front and back row of seats in my car. The officer explained had the collision occurred just an inch to the right or left, there would likely have been severe injuries—possibly even deaths.

Another major mitigating factor was that, by chance, my son stopped the car directly over a large puddle of rainwater. The officer explained when the 280z struck the left side of the vehicle, my car hydroplaned approximately twenty feet from the location where the collision took place.

Had the road surface been dry, my car would have remained stationary, absorbing the full energy of the collision. The police officer then shook his head, telling me how lucky they were. It wasn't luck. Michael and I both witnessed a miracle.

Before we went home that night, I took him to the hospital to face the kids he put there. When we arrived, I made Michael apologize to the kids and their parents. I was determined to have him see firsthand how his lying and disregarding of my single restriction could have killed all four of them.

As a father, I wasn't sure how to discipline this 16-year-old teenager. When I woke up the following morning, I found Michael had left his driver's license and his total savings of \$100 on my dresser. I can't remember the specific discipline we applied, but I found his repentance made it hard for me to stay angry. Whatever discipline I imposed eventually proved insufficient as he only got better at lying and avoiding the consequences of his actions throughout his life.

As stated above, I hated lying; something I preached them from the time they were old enough to talk. I told both Michael and Nicole, "*There is something worse than straight out lying; it is telling half-truths.*" Like in the book of Genesis when the serpent told Eve that although God told her she would die from eating of the forbidden fruit, in fact, they would not die—suggesting it was God who was the liar and not the Serpent.

She ate from the fruit, and she didn't die—not immediately anyways. But after she and Adam both ate from the forbidden tree, they were both kicked out of Paradise. Just as God warned them, they did die; it just took 930 years eking out a miserable existence outside paradise first.

From one of the oldest stories ever recorded thousands of years ago, and found in the first book of the bible “Genesis,” we are taught that deception destroys relationships. Adam and Eve's lies destroyed their relationship with God. Michael's lies destroyed our relationship.

In the corporate world, if someone had something important to tell me, and they were known to be half-truthers, I wouldn't speak to them. I found listening to them requires too much time separating the wheat from the chaff. I would find out what I needed from somewhere else.

Much of my disdain for deceit only grew when I joined a very prestigious management consulting firm. My new boss handed me a book on how to be a successful businessman; to him, that meant getting rich—and *fast*. The book described in great detail how corporations successfully lied and fraudulently cheated the government out of billions of dollars through carefully crafted contract language.

When I finished and handed the book back to my boss, I asked him, “*Boss, is this how I'm not to conduct business, or is this what you want me to do?*” He was clever enough not to answer.

Towards the end of Michael's life, and during one of his stays at a rehab facility, I gave him a copy of that book. He was fascinated to read how low dishonest people would go to make a buck. Looking back for the first time, he could see how this corruption had occurred throughout his life but he just didn't realize it until he read the book.

I think Michael was finally understanding what I had been drilling into his head all along. Lying comes straight from the father of lies, who lives in a place called hell. From that point forward, Michael began telling me the truth, which was hard to hear during his last few years.



Michael was a chemical engineer, and he was familiar with Newton's third law of motion: *"For every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction."* I wish I had explained to Michael that this law applies to the practice of lying as well. Those who lie will feel the weight of it coming back to them in equal and full measure.

Deceit will catch you in this life or the next—Michael found that out the hard way. I remember telling him another one of my favorite sayings:

*"Those who practice deceit lose their ability to discern the truth."*

It turns out deceivers are the easiest to be deceived.



## CHAPTER 12

### EMPLOYMENT

After graduating from college, Michael was fortunate enough to land an excellent job with Excelon Energy Division, and everything was beautiful at the beginning. Bosses loved him, and vice versa. He was assigned to be the commissioning engineer for starting up new power plants. He was considered an extremely smart troubleshooter and impressed everyone who mattered.

His friends told me Michael was always making them laugh. Getting people laugh was his favorite activity at work and at home. Even in his twenties, he still enjoyed dressing up during Halloween just to get laughs out of people.



His career was on the rise during these first few years with Excelon. His first two tours were in Utah and Long Island. As soon as he was married, he and his wife went to Columbia for his new assignment.

Michael married a beautiful girl. She was perfect for him; she laughed at all his jokes and supported Michael wherever he went. Being overseas, she had no friends and few places she could travel alone safely, but she was willing to do it for the man she loved.

During this time, Michael did something so strange that I still don't understand. He had another guy, who worked with Michael in Columbia live with them for rent money. They were newlyweds for crying out loud and didn't need extra cash. I counseled him, telling him he needed alone time with his bride if he wanted to nourish a healthy marriage. He discounted my advice.

It pains me to write about his marriage; it was the one thing he never wanted to lose. Over time, his wife divorced him. His drinking and anger together destroyed the one relationship that mattered the most to him.

During his time in Columbia, the job was going okay, but it was not nearly as agreeable to him as his first two assignments in the United States. He continually complained about the food, which he claimed made him sick. When he returned to the United States, he allegedly kissed the ground as he debarked from the plane.

After Columbia, he was assigned by his employer to a project in West VA. He and his boss disliked each other from the start. Fighting his boss did not fare well for him. To avoid working closely with Michael, the boss rewarded him with the midnight shift.

Things were so bad that Michael applied for internal jobs at Excelon, hoping to come back to Orlando. He thought coming back to Orlando would be good for his marriage and his career. He couldn't have been more wrong on both accounts.

Michael was eventually offered a job at Orlando's headquarters—but as Project Controls Engineer. I explained to him that Project Controllers sit behind a cubicle all day creating and managing project schedules and budgets, something he would *hate*.

I told him he was a mover and a shaker, a person gifted with engineering skills and leadership potential that got things done. Yet he didn't listen. I always preached to the kids: study and work in a vocation you have a passion for. He had no such passion for becoming a scheduler. The job sucked the life out of him.

Moving back to Orlando to help their marriage was even a bigger mistake. His wife's mother lived in Orlando, and she did not like Michael—and for a good reason. Before they were married, he and

his fiancé (at the time) were visiting her mother. Her mother was painting the inside of her apartment. As I understand it, her mother left for a while, and during her absence, Michael took the paintbrush and wrote “*F\*\*\* You*” on the wall. Could you blame her for not being crazy about her future son-in-law? Years later, I was glad to hear Michael did send her a letter apologizing for this immature and foolish behavior.

During his stay in Orlando, everything in his life went south. Eventually, it led to an ugly divorce. From this point on, his life spiraled down and out of control. The divorce visibly shook him. He was hurting so badly inside. He wanted the marriage to work out, but her mom and one of her cousins fought against it and succeeded.

Embarrassed and hurt, Michael wanted to get as far away and as soon as possible from Orlando. He applied for a project controls assignment in Brazil, and off he went. This move, combined with his recent divorce, was the beginning of the end of Michael’s life.

The job site was in a dangerous part of Brazil, and, to no surprise, he and his new boss hated each other from the start. After a month, Michael called me every night from Brazil complaining about how miserable his life was.

These calls went on for hours and they occurred every night of the week. The hardest thing for me about the phone calls was that he was always intoxicated. The advice I gave him over the phone was forgotten, as his drinking prohibited him from retaining any of it. I simply became his shoulder to cry on. I heard from his friends that they, too, had taken hour-long calls right after he hung up with me.

His life now consisted of going to a job, report to a boss he hated, return to his hotel room after work, getting drunk, then calling me and others for hours until he fell asleep or passed out. The Brazil assignment proved to be the most devastating move of his life.

In time, Michael began to show up late for work or he just didn’t show up at all. His excuses were not believable, and his job performance slipped—as did his life.

During his stay in Brazil, he experienced some of the most horrifying experiences of his life, making his time there even more

intolerable. I do not know if these events actually occurred in Brazil or not. With his ongoing affair with drugs and alcohol, he may have been hallucinating them. Delusional or not, he believed they happened and reacted to them accordingly. If they did occur, I can't imagine how scared and lonely he must have felt. The following are his accounts.

### ***The Taxi Ride***

Michael was waiting at his hotel for a taxi to take him to the airport. He was taking some time off of work to meet a girlfriend in Colorado to snowboard with. There were many taxis lined up in front of the hotel. However, none of them were on the authorized list of legitimate taxis. Out of concern for their employees, Excelon only approved of a few taxis, which they considered to be legitimate and safe for their employees to use. Michael became impatient and took an unauthorized taxi.

According to Michael, he noticed the taxi driver was not heading to the airport at all. He found himself traveling down a dark and isolated road. As the taxi slowed down, shadowy figures were coming towards the taxi, and he felt his life was in danger.



From the back seat, Michael put the driver in a headlock and threatened to snap his neck if he didn't head to the airport immediately. Michael was powerful, and I believe he could have done just that.

He held the driver in the headlock for the entire trip to the airport. Once he got close to it, the taxi driver stopped, and Michael ordered him to pop the trunk so he could get his suitcase. He then walked the rest of the way.

### ***The Drug Cartel***

This next story remains confusing, but it was quite unsettling for him. While in Brazil, he was moving out of one hotel room to another. He was temporarily paying for both rooms so he'd have time to move his belongings from one place to the other. Returning

to his old room to move his final load, he discovered several strange looking bags lying around on the floor, though there was no one else there at the time. He was upset that anyone was in his place as he was still paying for it.

Michael decided to investigate and opened up the bags to see what was inside. He found passports, identification pictures, and other documents, which he photographed with his iPhone. Michael sent them to me and then immediately called to tell me he thought the owners of the bags were members of a drug cartel.

I told Michael to stop playing Dick Tracy and asked him why he felt compelled to search these peoples' bags in the first place. I snapped at him asking him why in the hell he didn't just leave and move on if he thought they were dangerous. He did not relent. He called me several times that day to discuss the IDs and other documents he sent me from his phone. I told him I had no idea what they meant, and neither did he. Weeks later, he moved on. Thank God.

### ***Self-Defense***

This next story troubled Michael (and me) the most. Returning from the grocery store back to his hotel, he was walking down a deserted alley of sorts. He said three guys attacked him. Michael claims he was so jacked up on adrenaline he beat them all up. He believed he may have even killed one or two out of self-defense. Scared for his life, he went straight to his room and didn't leave it for days.

He was so scared he drank himself into a blackout to put the event out of his mind. Days later, he finally called and told me what happened. I told him, "*Get your ass on the next plane and come home right now, damn it. To hell with your job—come home now!*" It was one of the few times he listened to me. Somehow, he hung on to his job; his employer let him come back to his old project control duties in Orlando.

Are these stories true? He believed them and responded to them as if they were.

Something quite serious must have happened in Brazil, because when he returned home, he was *very* different, as described in the following chapter.





## CHAPTER 13

### POST BRAZIL

When Michael returned home from Brazil, he was not the same. I hardly recognized him. He was void of joy and peace, and he began to cry spontaneously. He was damaged. I'd never seen him in such a dark place. Paranoid and frightened, his drinking only got worse, and he desperately wanted to put the whole Brazil experience out of his mind—but he couldn't.

When he returned to his old job—the one he hated—he was back in his cubicle working on schedules again. Bored and depressed, he started going to work intoxicated from vodka. Being a clear liquid, he successfully mixed it into his soda without getting caught. At noon, he would go straight to his car where he drank his lunch.

He stopped showing up for work more and more, especially on Mondays after drinking over the weekends (or after a holiday). He eventually just stopped going to work at all. He left on Wednesday, the day before Thanksgiving, and never went back.

When I spoke to him, he told me he had plenty of money to live on for a long time and could draw down from his 401K early (which he eventually did). After Thanksgiving, he and his ex-wife got back together. It didn't last long; it was too late.

By this time, he was a full-blown alcoholic, drinking one or even two large bottles of vodka a day. God knows what drugs he was taking with it. He was no longer in charge of his life; the drinking and drugs owned him at this point. He reached the point of no return. I am certain of it.



## CHAPTER 14

### THE STRANGEST DREAM

It was my 60th birthday and my closest friend from high school, John, threw a big party for me. John must have spent thousands on this gig and there must have been 40 people at my party. John turned his home into a hotel so friends could spend the night if they drank too much to drive home.

John set up games and presented the winners with trophies. Afterward, John put his chef hat on and cooked up the most expensive steaks accompanied by more appetizers and desserts than one could imagine. Unfortunately, he also had an open bar.

In the evening, John brought out hundreds of dollars of fireworks and was about to start the night show. I was excited about this because Michael loved fireworks since he was a little kid. I didn't want John to begin until Michael was there. I looked everywhere for him. It was getting darker, and I couldn't find him. The show went on without him.

During the fireworks, I looked everywhere for him. I wanted him there with me. He always enjoyed watching and setting off fireworks and I wanted to share this moment with him.

The firework show was surely better than I remember. I was more concerned where Michael was. Finally, someone found him passed out in his car. I ran to it and opened the door. He looked at me and then looked down. He wanted to be left alone in the car, but I would not have it. He could have driven away intoxicated. With great difficulty and much help, we got Michael upstairs, where he passed out for the night.

When morning came, Michael snuck out before anybody else woke up and headed straight back to my home where he was living at the

time. As soon as I got home, I began looking for him. I remember so vividly what happened next. I was in my bedroom, and he walked in and just stared at me. He didn't know what I would say or do. Without even thinking, I walked up to him and put my arms around him. With tears coming down both of our faces, I remember exactly what I said to him. "*Michael, it's killing me watching you killing yourself.*"

What came next was something I am still trying to understand.

### ***Dream On***

A few days after my birthday, I had the strangest dream about Michael. In it, he had just returned home from Brazil. We were both in a house with two adjacent rooms connected. I was in the family room and Michael was in the kitchen. He was preparing a meal for his buddies there, and it looked like he was having a good time.

In the family room where I was, there was a large-screen TV. Michael yelled out from the kitchen, "*Dad, do not watch anything on that TV.*" But when he wasn't looking, I began to watch what was playing.

To my surprise, I saw my father on the TV. He was crying uncontrollably and his arms were thrashing all about as if he had no control over them. His head began to shake so fast that the image blurred. Once the shaking stopped, the image became clear again. But, the image was no longer of my father; it was now the image of myself.

At this time, Michael saw I was watching the television. He immediately ran from the kitchen to the family room and turned the TV off. He was extremely upset because he said the TV showed me what happened to him in Brazil; something he did not want me to know about. I then woke up and thought to myself, *what a strange dream.*

Just a few days after the dream, I woke up on the following Saturday morning and checked my phone for messages. I was sickened by what I saw. Michael sent me a picture of himself with his shirt off, a massive black eye, and his body covered with bruises and scratches from a bouncer in Tampa. The bouncer believed Michael

had not paid for the bar's services and decided to take his pound of flesh from him as payment and in the form of a sucker punch.

He became unconscious, suffering from a head injury. He was hit right above his right eye, and I was worried that he might have sustained a severe head injury and possible damage to his eye. I discovered that he sent the picture to all of his friends. They thought it was cool. I wept.

I talked to Michael the following week, and I said something that was not nice. I don't remember the specifics, but it bothered me enough to call him at work and apologize. When I called him, I was driving back from the grocery store, when I suddenly started to cry uncontrollably. I cut the call short because I couldn't talk. I could only cry hysterically.

After I hung up, I got out of my car and went upstairs to my bonus room, thinking I would settle down. I did not. I wept uncontrollably and collapsed to my knees. What came next was scary. My arms thrashed aimlessly on their own. I couldn't control my limbs.

About a half an hour later, Michael came home to check on me. He saw me in this frantic condition. He didn't stay longer than a few minutes as he was uncomfortable with what was going on. He called my wife to tell her what was happening.

Finally, I settled down a bit and took a cold shower to help me snap out of my condition. I felt better and put on my best face so my wife Carol wouldn't see me in my emotional state when she got home. She came in, and I acted as if nothing had happened. I remember going to the freezer to get ice. Suddenly, I collapsed to the floor again, with my arms thrashing uncontrollably.

Carol tried to help but couldn't do much. She did convince me to go to the hospital, but I would not go by ambulance as a condition. Unable to stand, I crawled into the back of her car in the same state. I laid low, as I was afraid my neighbors might see me in such a condition.

We made it to the Emergency Room. The doctors didn't understand what was going on as I continued to cry and continued to thrash my

arms about. The Doctor gave me an injection to calm me down and kept me overnight for observation.

Everything I went through that day—crying uncontrollably, arms thrashing about, being unable to stop weeping— it all occurred just like in my dream I had just a few days before. Was this a prophetic dream or a warning of some kind? And if so, what good was it for me to have seen it?

### *Al-Anon*

I began attending Al-Anon meetings. Al-Anon is one of the oldest and largest fellowship groups in the world designed to help people affected by a loved one's drinking and drug abuse. The group I attended was conveniently held at the church I was attending. I was the only man in a group of about 15 people. All the women shared about their struggles dealing with their loved ones, which were mainly their children.

The meetings stressed the importance of not letting an addicted child (or loved one) take you down with them. People shared how to sever emotional ties and monetary support to their addicted loved ones. I got it. I watched Dr. Phil as well, but the thought of turning my son away when he was in his worst state did not sit well with me.

The last night I attended Al-Anon, I cut out early. That evening, they were discussing how to respond when your addicted child dies. It was so difficult to hear them talk so nonchalantly about the death of their child—with little or no emotion. It made me uneasy. One member who knew my situation was talking to me in a way that seemed as she was preparing me for my son's death.

I broke down and walked out as quickly as I could to get to my car. Crying heavily, I felt as though I was about to go through another breakdown. I wanted to stop, so I turned the radio up loudly and blasted the air conditioning on my face for about a half an hour. I calmed down enough to drive home, but I never returned to that group again.

## CHAPTER 15

### REHAB

Sometime in 2014, Michael frequently called me crying and for the first time (and certainly not the last) he began threatening to end his life. During one call, he reluctantly gave me the address of his apartment to talk to him face to face. Previously, he refused to give it to me or his mom, as he didn't want us to visit him and see him in his condition.

My wife and I got in the car, went to the apartment, and insisted he go to a nearby rehabilitation center in Orlando. We practically dragged him out of the apartment, but it was Carol who finally talked him into going. We got him committed late that night. Over the next few years, Michael went to many rehabilitation centers and was a repeat guest of two of them.

Rehab is essentially the last alternative left for the addict, even though the success rates of recovery through rehab are dismal. According to the St. Jude Retreat Center, independent studies confirm that the success rates for these programs range from 3% to 8% at 5-year post-treatment.

Addiction recovery rates for popular 12 Step groups such as AA may be as low as 5-10%, according to Dr. Lance Dodes, author of *The Sober Truth*. I do celebrate with those whom these programs have helped, like Michael's friend and roommate. He was addicted as my son was, and he has remained clean since 2011, which he attributes largely to his time in rehab.

Most parents, like myself, don't know what else to do. Every medical doctor and counselor I spoke with always urged us to "*Take Michael to Rehab.*" I think saying this somehow made them feel as

if they helped in some way. There were no other options available, regardless of how small a chance Michael had to benefit from them.

We supported Michael through one rehab to the next. Out of them all, the best, in his opinion, was one in Atlanta. He liked one doctor whom he felt “*got him*” and could get through to him, but in the end, it still was not enough.

Despite the low odds of success, the costs of rehab programs are high. Fortunately, Michael still had health insurance from his former employer, followed by Cobra. Although it did not cover all of the expenses, it helped a lot.

Most of the rehab facilities seem more concerned about milking the patient’s insurance policies—and their parents if they had money. At some point, you question if rehab recovery programs are just a waste of money. For me, it was just buying time and hoping for a miracle to happen along the way.

### ***Firsthand Rehab Experience***

I can speak to the rehab experience as a patient myself. In 2016, when I was working in Oakland, CA, Michael’s phone calls were coming in daily and seemed direr each time we spoke. Hearing his frequent threats of him killing himself while drunk and drugged over the phone just became too much.

My blood pressure was through the roof (easily exceeding 200 over 120 at times), so my wife took me to the Hospital. One doctor took an interest in me. He knew I was super depressed; it was written all over me.

The doctor believed I was suicidal based upon several conversations I had with him that evening. To help me through this most depressing time, he asked me to admit myself to a facility to help me through it, and I agreed.

You can imagine, how surprised I was to discover that I was admitted to a rehab facility that utilized the same program tailored to young alcoholics and drug addicts—a program just like the ones Michael attended.



Our rehab group consisted of about 50 people. Each of us attended the same program, went to the same classes, and read from the same materials. Somehow, this program was magically designed to address everyone's needs from the addicted to the suicidal. Our small group activities and discussion times were just laughable and so futile. The younger addicts developed new relationships with each other and shared their sources for future drug purchases.

I knew this program would not be helpful for me, but I was curious. I decided to stay for the full two weeks to better understand what Michael experienced and why it was so ineffective. As if Michael's addictions were not bad enough, he had to sit through meaningless programs over and over again. I don't know how he did it.

After Michael's passing, I discovered from a number of his fellow rehab guests that Michael was known for his kindness. He was always looking for a way to brighten up those inside a gloomy rehab facility.

They said he understood their pain and wanted to help them through it with encouragement and good deeds. It turned out Michael was helping the patients more than the rehab staff ever could. When I heard all the stories of Michael and how he helped his fellow patients, I was so very proud of him, but I wasn't surprised. I knew deep down Michael would go to bat for the oppressed. He always did.

Once, when Michael was between rehabs, he was supposed to go to AA meetings. He did go, but I later discovered he didn't stay. Michael provided a free taxi service for his addicted friends who could not afford transportation. He dropped them off at the AA meeting location and then returned later to pick them up to take them home.

### ***Too Few Options for the Addicted***

The odds of an addict recovering are so low. So why do we continue to invest so much time, money, and effort into these programs?

Albert Einstein once said, "*The definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over again but expecting different results.*" It

may be insane, but there is a lot of money to be made from such insanity.

The system is largely ineffective, but why would someone change the status quo when revenues and profits are so high for rehab facilities and programs? I don't know the best recovery techniques, but if I were given a chance to try another way, I would achieve a much better success rate than 10%.

From watching what Michael went through, I learned how difficult it is for an addict to admit him or herself into a facility hoping for an open arm greeting and understanding environment, only finding out soon thereafter, they are treated more like a prisoner. One which is accompanied by an elaborate set of punitive rules and punishments enforced by some (too many) who are more interested in their power over their patients than their care for them.

Once I learned Michael was banned from going to a horse farm because one therapist didn't think he was respectful enough to her. Instead, he was confined to spend his Saturday alone rather than riding and caring for horses, which is deemed to be therapeutic. Treating them with such disrespect is an atrocity.

If I were in charge, Rule #1 would be to show the utmost respect for any addict who knowingly and voluntarily admits him/herself into a demanding and unpleasant program for weeks or months to follow.

Following Michael's death, we received many testimonials from those who spent time with Michael in rehab facilities. Michael was their friend, and he did whatever he could to lift their spirits. There are too many accounts to include here. However, I chose those I believe best represent Michael's impact on his rehab peers and friends.

***Testimonials from Rehab Friends (unedited)***

- ❖ *Mike had such a kind heart. I met Mike at River Oakes in October/November of 2016. It was such a short time of my life, but I can definitely say he made an impact on my life. I was in such a bad place. I in no way, shape, or*

*form wanted to be there. I was 19, and I just wanted to live my life how I wanted. I had no ambition to be sober.*

- ❖ *Mike was so sweet to me. He would sit at the fountain, play his guitar, and tell me everything I needed to hear (but didn't always want to hear). Today, my life is 10 times more amazing than I ever thought it would be.*
- ❖ *Mike's influence kept me sober. I know honestly, I wouldn't be here if it wasn't for him and a few others I met at River Oakes. He was such a kind spirit. He always made me feel welcome. I wish I could have told him about the impact he made in my life.*
- ❖ *Michael wrote this message to me just over a week ago along with so many other kind, loving messages. Michael may have been known at Talbot as "Angry Mike," but to me u were "brother Michael" and u always looked out for me like an older brother. Ur a real angel now brother. U got ur wings, and I know ur using them. Probably flying around the afterlife fast as hell, telling the other angels to watch out before u run them over, lol. U were such an adrenaline junkie and ur gonna be missed so much. U were loved, brother. I can't believe ur gone....*
- ❖ *My heart is broken to find we lost u. Michael Cannell, u were a role model to me, u always tried to keep me positive, and u helped me anyway u could. U were an amazing guy, and the world isn't gonna be the same without u, man. Love u bro and rip! Maybe we can snowboard in heaven when I meet u after this life since we never got to snowboard in person like we planned so many times. Gonna miss u, brother.*
- ❖ *Nicole: I was floored when I found out your brother had passed away. Mike was an amazing friend. I came to GIC with a very abusive background, and I was terrified of my ex*

*coming back. Mike was the best friend a girl could have! I knew that if my ex came around, my friend Mike would protect me. He not only had a heart of gold, but he was so funny! He loved big time and I miss him.*

- ❖ *I spent time with Mike at the Go Recovery Center in December. He was my roommate for the duration of his stay, and we hit it off immediately. I felt that we were kindred spirits and destined to meet and have laughs no matter what we were going through. I was admitted on December 3rd for my alcohol dependency and massive seizures that almost killed me while driving. I was miserable for the first week and did not have a connection with anyone—then Mike showed up.*
  
- ❖ *I was sad when Mike left treatment, but I knew we would stay in touch. We kept in touch via text and a phone call or two but mostly via Facebook messenger, and we were hoping to get together. I know this cannot happen, but I want to let you and your family know that Mike gave me hope, friendship, and he made me smile and laugh. I treasure the time we shared together, and my prayers are with you and your family. I will miss him, as he was a good person who cared about those around him, and I am lucky that I can call him a friend.*

## CHAPTER 16

### THE REHAB TRIP FROM HELL

Getting Michael to admit himself to rehab was always difficult. However, there was one rehab experience that showed me how bad things were going for him. He was living at his friend's house, who called us up to pick him up. He was concerned that Michael's use of illegal drugs could incriminate him if the police found out.

Carol and I agreed that we needed to get him back to the rehab facility in Atlanta. We knew he would fight it, but convincing him would be easier if he had access to his car in Atlanta. From past visits, we knew the rehab facility allowed its guests to drive once they successfully reached a certain point in their program. Carol drove her car with Michael, and I followed them driving his vehicle so as to leave it at the facility for him to drive once the Doctors believed it would be safe for him to do so.

When we got to his friend's house, Michael was sitting outside on the porch making it quite clear he was not going without a fight. It was so pathetic to watch him begging his friend to take him back. After an hour-long struggle between Michael pleading and his friend pretending to call the police, we finally got him in Carol's car and we were off.

It was too long of a drive to Atlanta that evening, so we stayed in a hotel in Florida that night. For reasons I don't quite understand, Michael was angry with me and wouldn't share a room with me, so we got two rooms. After waking up the next morning, there was plenty of time to make it to Atlanta.

As we were getting close to the rehab facility, Michael told us he wasn't going after all, which resulted in another round of difficult negotiations in order to get him there.

He finally agreed to go to rehab the next morning if we stayed in a nice hotel for the night. He insisted the hotel had to have a pool. He had no plans to swim. Insisting the hotel had to have a pool was his way of telling me a pool would be available to him, should he decide to drown himself rather than going to rehab the following day.

During the hotel stay, he decided he wanted to talk with me. When I went to his room, he asked Carol to leave. He wanted me to know he was extremely distressed over the events that occurred in Brazil. As he cried in anger aimed at himself, all I could do was watch him and be there for him.

The following morning, we all got into Carol's car and headed for the rehab facility. He was showing signs of frustration and anger and insisted he needed to get drunk before he got there.

I discovered his health insurance would not pay for any part of his rehab stay unless he entered the facility intoxicated. How absurd—yet this is how the system works.

He told me to stop by any convenience store and buy him a bottle of wine. He said any wine would be fine. I did buy him a bottle, but once he tasted it, he said he couldn't drink "*this crap.*" He wanted something better, and I eventually found one acceptable to him.

When we reached the rehab facility, the first thing the staff did was ensure he was measurably intoxicated. Once they determined he was, they admitted him.

It seemed Michael's presence was big news on the campus there. His fellow patients were so happy to see him back. Michael was like a rock star there and was welcomed back with open arms from his old friends.

I left his car there, but not before going through the junk in his vehicle. There were loaded heroin syringes inside, which we destroyed.

## CHAPTER 17

### THE WORST OF ALL THIEVES

#### *The Great Brain Robbery*

Michael was born with a high IQ of 139. Over the last few years of his life, however, I watched Michael make many unusual and poor choices. He used to be so sharp and so quick.

During one of his rehab stays, he called me and his mom to ask if we had the paperwork validating his 139 IQ. We couldn't find it, but the intention behind his request is what saddened me. He wanted to show his friends that he was really smart—at one time.

I later found out that Michael retested himself and discovered his IQ dropped 25 points down to 115. An IQ of 115 is still high, but it's a long way from being just 1 point away from being classified as genius—as he was prior to addiction. The doctors were amazed he had any IQ at all in light of the massive amounts of alcohol he consumed daily.

When Michael got the new IQ score, it killed him. This piece of his self-image that was so important to him was rapidly declining, and all he could do was to watch it continue to drop from a rehab facility.

I knew Michael was quickly losing his ability to make logical decisions. He had a love affair with cars; he owned a VW GTI and a Ford pick-up truck while he was living in an apartment in Orlando around 2015. They were getting old, but they were paid off. The plan (my plan) was for him to sell both cars and use the cash to buy one good used car without incurring any debt. Having no job at the time, it didn't make sense for him to go into debt on anything.

Michael was having difficulty selling the vehicles on his own. He could not find the cars' titles, and he was having trouble writing simple sales advertisements to sell the vehicles, which I eventually

wrote for him. His mom and I both helped him, but Carol did the most. She found the titles and made sure the vehicles were detailed to make them sell faster and at the best price.

During this time, Michael decided to check in at a local hotel just a few miles from where we lived. When he found himself in a state of extreme depression, he would sometimes check in at a hotel to drink himself into a blackout without anyone knowing where he was for days.

This time, however, we received a call from the hotel telling us there were numerous police cars and an ambulance crew attending to Michael. When his mother and I arrived at the hotel and entered his room, he was intoxicated. Soon thereafter, the police and ambulance left. They appeared disappointed they made such a fuss over nothing but a routine intoxication.

I don't know why the hotel desk clerk called 911. I suspect, Michael gave the check-in clerk a clue like, *"I'm going drink myself into a blackout, so if anything goes bad, call my parents, and here is my dad's cell number."*

It was at this moment, once the police left, that he told me he found the car of his dreams: a new Toyota 4Runner that cost over \$35,000. He somehow fell in love with it, and he had already signed the contract.

I begged him not to go in this direction. It was so impractical for him to take on monthly payments that looked more of what one would expend for a home mortgage. He was unemployed. How did he even get approved for the car loan? To quiet me down, he said *"Dad, it's too late. I already bought it. Don't interfere."* Then he let me know it would arrive in a few weeks.

In all this commotion, his mother and I convinced him to go back to the rehab center in Atlanta. He agreed to go as long as I promised not to get in the way of his car purchase. From his hotel room, I made two plane reservations for Carol and Michael, and they only had a few hours to get to the airport. Fortunately, they made it.

One of Michael's roommates in the Atlanta rehab facility was a recovering medical doctor. When I spoke to him previously, he



offered to do anything he could to help Michael. From the hotel, I called him and told him about Michael's erratic behavior and asked why he would buy something he couldn't afford.

His only and persistent response was, "*I'm sorry Mr. Cannell. I'm very, very sorry.*" He must have repeated that three more times before I finally got what he was telling me. Being a medical doctor, and having seen Michael closely as a roommate, he had reached a conclusion. He was implying to me that it was too late to help Michael, which is what I was afraid of.

After Michael left on the plane to Atlanta with his mom, I tried to kill the contract at the Toyota dealership. I faxed the salesman about the circumstances. I followed up with a call explaining Michael's state of mind and that he was intoxicated when he signed the contract. That call lasted maybe one minute.

The salesman didn't care what state of mind Michael was in; he had just sold a big and expensive car giving him bragging rights to management. Two weeks later, Michael returned from Atlanta and became the proud owner of a brand new Toyota 4Runner with no job to keep up with the payments.

Fast-forwarding just a few months later, Michael and his new car, took off to enter into another rehab facility in Denver, Colorado. I assume he picked Denver so he could snowboard.

As fate would have it, a car collided into his new car, and the insurance deemed the 4Runner totaled (and it was not his fault). This meant Michael would receive a dollar amount sufficient to pay off this unaffordable car. I was breathing a sigh of relief thinking God gave him a second chance to get practical and pay off the loan in full and then buy a good used car with cash only. Instead, he bought the same big car. This time, it came with a 4-wheel drive accessory.

The example above was just one of the many illogical choices he was making during his last few years. I realized some part of his brain was damaged. It just killed me to realize and accept this reality. So much potential lost...and no longer retrievable.

### *Stolen Self-Image*

As mentioned earlier, Michael was always upset he was only 5' 7". When Michael was in college, he had a big crush on a girl. I met her and she was beautiful but was torn between two lovers. She chose the other guy over Michael. He told me the other guy was over six feet tall and believed that was the reason he lost her. I never forgot his despair over this. I sometimes wonder how differently things could have been if she would have chosen him.

During his last few years, he took his unhappiness over his height to a new level. He became obsessed with his height 24/7. I never pegged Michael to be a person with Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder when he was growing up, but I now believe addiction had another secret weapon. I believe it has the power to awaken dormant destructive behaviors that would have never otherwise seen the light of day.

To compensate for his height, he would buy expensive watches with eye-catching and costly clothes. He'd purchase shoes with thick soles and heels hoping to gain an inch. The new Toyota 4Runner he purchased was big for a reason. He did all of this to keep his friends focused on anything but his height. If Michael had just looked down, he would have seen his friends looking up at him, but he didn't. Instead, he looked at a ruler to measure his worth.

While still employed by Excelon, he convinced himself his height was keeping him from being taken seriously and from promotions. To look more mature, he purchased expensive eyeglasses with no corrective lens in them— just plain glass. He believed his employers would look at him with more respect if he wore them.

For appearance sake, he took anabolic hormones (better known as Human Growth Hormones or HGH) to beef up so he'd be taken more seriously. He reasoned: if athletes could benefit from HGH, why couldn't he? The hormones did make him bigger, but at a cost. I noticed a distinctive and displeasing change. His forehead thickened, and other subtle and unflattering changes appeared.

From the hormones came acne-like blisters, which he picked at constantly. To cover-up, he began to use make-up.

### ***Loss of Social Skills***

About a year before he passed, he joined a bowling league. He, like the professional bowlers, used a custom 2-hole bowling ball. Like them, he could throw and spin the ball from the far right of the lane, which would slam into the center of the pins for a strike. Again, what I could never do with a bowling ball, he could naturally do so and without effort.

He came to me one night looking down, and I asked him if he was okay. He said, *“I was just cut from my bowling team.”* They said he was drinking too much and acting up. Michael looked at me sadly and said, *“Who gets cut from a bowling team?”* I knew he was hurting, and I could do nothing except reassure him we would never cut him from our team.

### ***Loss of Being Free from Social Anxieties***

In Michael’s last letter that he was in the process of writing me, he wrote something that troubles me as it should for any parent raising teenagers. In the letter, he writes...

*“I never intended to hurt anyone and never drank in order to do anything other than alleviate my own social anxiety and fears.”*

One does not have to be a psychologist to figure what Michael is saying. The need to be accepted is the bold underline of his quote. Before, becoming a non-recoverable alcoholic, he chose to drink to relax himself so as to appear cool to his friends.

Think about this—the need to be accepted was so strong, Michael began to drink in his teen years and continued to do so throughout his life just to *“fit in.”* What was once just a casual drink with his pals, became a vice that eventually resulted in him becoming an alcoholic.

I remain puzzled why he thought just being Michael was not enough. So many kids wanted to be like him, but he apparently was not one of them.

Peer pressure, fitting in, being accepted, being liked, being popular, etc. These were the concerns that led Michael to begin drinking during his teenage years and from there, throughout his life.

These should also be the concerns of parents with teenagers to address and find ways to make them feel and believe they are acceptable, beautiful and a gift to the world, just the way God made them.

### ***Loss of Self Confidence & Self Image***

I tried to convince him to go back to work for a reputable power plant company and become a start-up engineer like he had been when his career was taking off. Back then, he had so much confidence that one of his friends nicknamed him *“the cowboy engineer.”* The more I tried to get him back in the saddle, the more I sensed he was afraid he couldn’t pull it off again.

His self-image was so damaged towards the end. One night he came home to tell me he met some really hot chick and so I asked him if he got her number. He said *“Dad, She’s out of my league.”* This wasn’t the young man of just a few years ago. Then, nobody was out of his league. He believed he was a player in the big leagues, and confident enough to ask for any girl’s number, but not towards the end. Then, he didn’t feel worthy to be on any team.

There is a picture of Michael that still troubles me from the first time I saw it. Towards the end Michael was looking for jobs and he attached this picture to his resume. To me, it was like looking at a soul half empty, and maybe much closer to the bottom. Looking at pictures of Michael taken over his life—the *“before and after ones”* is like watching a good slide show gone bad, very bad. No more smiles, just a reflection of sorrow and sadness.



### ***Lost Job***

One night in 2016 (while I was working in CA), Michael called me and Carol in desperation. Michael had just gotten himself into a

terrible spot with his new boss. He was in Denver at the time trying to sell roofs for commission. When he discovered his boss was holding out on his pay, all hell broke out. Michael exploded, and the boss put a gun to his head threatening to kill him if he didn't get his act together.

In response, Carol decided to fly to Denver to assess Michael's crisis and to be there for him. Just days later after she arrived, fate reappeared once again. One of Michael's friends from Excelon found a job for him in Ohio. It wasn't a job with Excelon, but it was a legitimate company looking for a project controller with engineering experience, and Michael fit the bill.

His mom helped him pack up in a U-Haul in Denver and off they drove to Ohio. After all of that, Michael was fired on Monday morning of his second week of employment for being intoxicated on the job. So devastated and embarrassed, Michael checked into a remote hotel and drank himself into a blackout for several days. Eventually, and with Carol's help, he returned to Orlando to live with his friend once again.

I don't know how Carol did so much for Michael. My mom says she has a gift. She possesses an unlimited amount of love and energy, which is precisely what Michael needed. I remember one night I was on the phone with Michael, and the subject of his mom came up. He said, "*Dad, Mom is such a sweetheart.*" She is, and a lot of her love and caring for him and others rubbed off on him and he shared it with others in need of it.

### ***Lost Peace***

Addiction robbed him from ever being at peace. The autopsy report states the cause of death was an overdose of fentanyl. I don't entirely believe that. In my opinion, Michael died of a troubled conscious that continually reminded him of everything he did wrong. It constantly accused him of failing to be a success in the eyes of his family and friends. He drank and drugged himself to numb his conscious as a substitute for peace.

***Michael Stolen***

Addictions are never satisfied. They aren't content with destroying one's past and present life; they want one's future as well. Addictions stole Michael's future. He would never have children to tell bedtime stories or teach them how to do backflips. He would not be around to teach them how to ride a bike, float on skateboards, or fly a kite. No helping with homework, no prom, no weddings, paradise lost.

Having eaten of the forbidden fruit, he became naked and ashamed, and died before his time.

Addiction stole Michael from us, but not until it took him apart one piece at a time and every hour of his days until there was nothing left to steal.

## CHAPTER 18

### ON THE EVE OF HIS DEATH

The night before he died, Michael called his mom to take him to a local hospital so he could get detoxed again. Detoxification is very difficult and can last from 3 to 7 days. According to WebMD, symptoms include: “exhaustion, irritability, achiness, flulike symptoms, diarrhea, rashes, sweats, chills, crying jags, insomnia, and more.”

Michael’s roommate, a previous addict who thankfully is now clean, explained what detox entailed from his personal experience. He said, *“The first time I went to detox, it was bad but only lasted a few days. But each succeeding detox gets worse and longer than the one before.”*

For someone like Michael who endured numerous detoxifications, this one would take up to two or three weeks with even worse withdrawal effects than he had ever experienced before. I am not sure how many detoxifications he went through, but there were many. He was willing to gut it out time and time again hoping for one of them to take.

When Michael and his mom arrived at the hospital, they were both unaware it would be his last visit to any hospital ever again. Michael always leaned on his mom and trusted her more than anyone else. She was his Guardian Angel, and was there for him no matter the circumstances. I can’t count all the times Carol ran to his aid. She helped him move from one apartment to the next over the last few years of his life, regardless of how difficult those years were.

After sitting around a long time at the hospital for some nurse to take Michael to their detox center, one of the crazy patients started to yell at Michael, accusing him of trying to harm her. Just imagine how he

must have felt. Carol, seeing the situation and Michael's look of deep despair, they both decided enough was enough. They both realized staying would be worse for him than leaving. That evening, she encouraged and offered to take him to our house, but on that night, Michael wanted to stay at his friend's house.

The following morning, his mom was on her way over with a McDonald's breakfast for Michael. When she arrived, she saw ambulances and police officers at the house. Carol attempted to enter the home to see Michael, but the police would not allow to enter as they were still attempting to revive him. Soon thereafter, he was declared dead.

The autopsy report stated the cause of death was fentanyl, but it didn't provide the reason why Michael used it. A few years before he died, he had briefly died from an overdose of heroin. His friend saw that Michael was slipping away and revived him with Naloxone.

When Michael came to, instead of being grateful, he was angry. He said, "*Why did you bring me back?*" When I heard this, I knew for sure he was suicidal. Being honest—though I hate to think about it—I suspect Michael may have intentionally overdosed to escape the hell he was living in.

Michael was a chemical engineer and very smart. He knew what was likely to happen to him with continued drug injections. I know my son. If he were intent on suicide, he would do anything to convince the coroner and his family that his death was anything but suicide. He would want us all to believe he accidentally died of a drug overdose.

Michael knew his family and his friends would react quite differently if the coroner's report read that the cause of death was suicide. And he would be right. It's only my opinion, but I believe he did take his life as a way of being thoughtful to the end. It is not a stretch for me to connect these dots, especially considering the letter he had written me stating, "*My denial has lead me to death's door on so many occasions it's just a matter of time.*"



There are different methods one could use for such a death, some of which are painful and take time. With more time, one might call a friend or phone a 1-800 suicide hotline to talk them down. However, this is not the case with opiates. Opiates strike quickly, conveniently, pleasurably, and fatally—no time to make a call.

Regardless of the cause, Michael lost. The drinking and drugs that seduced him for so many years won out. They took him from the face of the earth, and I hate them for what they did to my son.

God intervened at last and got him out ahead of schedule. He, like us, just couldn't stand seeing Michael so tortured any longer. Free at last. No more Detoxifications, no more rehabs, no more pain. I now thank God for sparing him and bringing him home. Finally, Michael is at peace.

In some way, I too found some peace knowing I would not wake up every morning worried about his well-being. But feeling a bit of peace made me feel sad. How could I feel anything but pain in light of my son's fate? I soon discovered there is no free lunch. With this small bit of peace, I discovered guilt was at my doorstep to remind me that I should have done more.

In the movie, *Schindler's List*, there is a scene where Oskar Schindler laments upon his failure to do more to save Jews from death. As World War II came to an end, the Russians liberated Jewish and other prisoners from concentration camps. Schindler is then encircled by the Jews he saved from Nazi gas chambers. They are lavishing him with praise and gratitude for their lives, yet he weeps uncontrollably.

Schindler couldn't take pride in his heroic actions that saved so many. Instead, Oskar Schindler tells those he just saved from certain death "*I could have gotten one more person... and I didn't.*" Then he confesses he could have sold his watch and other possessions to have saved others. He blames his failures upon his selfishness. That's how I will always feel as I look back to the opportunities I didn't act upon—opportunities that may have made a difference.

Soon after Michael's death, guilt's twin brother "*grief*" comes upon me as if from nowhere, hitting hard and below the belt. Grief is

something one can't prepare for; none can predict when it will strike, but it is always there waiting for the right time to inflict pain. Sometimes it gently reminds you of your loss, and sometimes it brings you down to your knees when you least expect it.

# CHAPTER 19

## PLUCKED OUT

### *The Penitent Man*

In Luke 18:10-14, Jesus told this parable to some people who thought they were righteous but viewed others with contempt:

*“Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood and was praying this to himself: ‘God, I thank You that I am not like other people: swindlers, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. ‘I fast twice a week; I pay tithes of all that I get.’*

*But the tax collector, standing some distance away, was even unwilling to lift up his eyes to heaven, but was beating his breast, saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, the sinner!’ I tell you, this man went to his house justified rather than the other; for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but he who humbles himself will be exalted.”*

Jesus is in the business of forgiveness. He forgave adulterers, the repentant man on the cross, the sinning tax collector, the lame man, the paralytic, the woman who washed his feet with perfume, and even those who nailed Him to the cross. These were the ones whom Jesus forgave. Michael is in good company.

Years ago, I heard a sermon I never forgot. The preacher made a statement I had to check out for myself. He said Jesus never—not even once—condemned a sinner for their moral failures. It checked out. He did, however, give hell to the religious people of his day for being hypocrites. These were the ones quick to point fingers at others.

## ***Raptured***

During the last few years of his life, Michael prayed fervently for the release of his addictions. He asked God to forgive him for letting Him down and for letting down all those who mattered most to him. He became so ashamed and remorseful towards his end. It broke my heart, and I didn't know what to do for him. He was in hell.

He wasn't the only one praying. I prayed to God every day—24/7, without ceasing—asking for Him to heal my son and free him from the shackles of addiction. Instead of Michael becoming freed from them, their hold on him only intensified. I begged and bargained with God to give me his pain in return for Michael's peace. Nothing materialized from these prayers. Michael seemed to be in more pain, and his psychological condition grew deeper in despair every day. I questioned if God cared at all.

In retrospect, I think God was listening mercifully. I believe he spared my son from any more torment by plucking him out of this world and placing him in his new home where he could find peace once again. It would not be the first time God pulled a loved one from earth to keep them from pain.

In the Old Testament, a man named Jeroboam, king of Northern Israel, led his citizens to turn away from God by worshiping golden calves. Alijah, the prophet, pronounced God's judgment on King Jeroboam as a result.

In 1 Kings 14:10-11, Alijah prophesized that the king and his family would be massacred as a result of his rebellion and their flesh would be thrown to the dogs and picked upon by birds of prey. But because God saw good in one of the King's sons, He allowed this boy to die early on in peace rather than suffer through the massacre his family was to experience (1 Kings 14:13).

This sort of reasoning seemed familiar to the ancients back in the days of Job as well. Job was tested and lost everything including his health. Job was humiliated sitting in the dust covered with sores and boils. He was in such bad shape that, in Job 2:9 his wife says (and I am paraphrasing of course) "*Honey, just curse God so you can die and end this silly test.*"

I thank God that he plucked Michael out of the torment he was in. I thank Him every day. Hell is no place for someone like my son to remain in.



## CHAPTER 20

### MICHAEL MICHAEL OH MY SON MICHAEL

#### *The Orlando Memorial Service*

My daughter and my nephew compiled a brilliant video showing the best of Michael's life and it was shown to those in attendance at the memorial service held in Orlando. For those who wish to see it, they can watch it on YouTube by placing the following text into the browser of a google web page as follows: "[https://youtu.be/p\\_7Y-cEOEnk](https://youtu.be/p_7Y-cEOEnk)."

The video begins with Michael singing with his guitar. There were so many beautiful memories of him. So painful it was to watch, that I have not watched it since. I plan on watching this video right before I die (if possible) followed immediately by my son greeting me.

Then, I expect him to look much different than he appeared to me in the dream I had of him the night he died, as discussed earlier. This dream showed Michael walking behind a wall with a look of disappointment and then disappears behind the it.

The next time we meet, I expect him to hop over that wall with a big bright smile similar to the one I witnessed him wearing the night the two of us camped under the beautiful Denver Sky. That night I remembered the two of us laying in our sleeping bags, marveling how clear and big the stars were, and wondered what lies beyond them. Soon, we will be able to pick up on that conversation.

Pastor Gus, Michael's friend, presided over the service. When the video of Michael's life ended, Pastor Gus just lost it. He began to cry uncontrollably, and we all followed suit. He supported Michael through his most difficult times.

Those in attendance were visibly uncomfortable from watching the video. This service was not one of those where the loss of a loved

one is celebrated and accompanied by joyful music. On the contrary, this was a very sad event where my son, bigger than life itself, lost his life before his time.

During the service, Michael's sister Nicole, gave her heartfelt tribute to her big brother. It was perfect. Sincere, heartfelt, sprinkled with just the right amount of humor. It was later read by her mother at the Columbus, Oh memorial service. I have included her tribute in the following chapter.

Following the Orlando Memorial service, we planned on having another one in Columbus, Ohio where most of his relatives live. We understood it would be too difficult for my parents and others to make the trip on such short notice. Carol believed it was important to give his family a chance to grieve and say goodbye. However, due to my emotional state, I just couldn't do it over again so soon.

### ***Columbus Memorial Service***

After two years to the day of Michael's passing, we finally had a small family memorial service in Columbus. This one was led by my brother Nick who is also a pastor. Michael loved his grandparents, and loved his aunts, uncles, and all of his cousins who came to give their respects. I'm sure Michael was quite happy to see them again.

Days before the Columbus service, I emailed the link of the video played at the Orlando service to all those who were to attend. I wanted them to watch the video before they came. I explained that I wasn't up to watch it again.

Everyone who came let me know that they saw the video. Nathan, his cousin, said he watched it at least ten times already. I told those in attendance that at the end of the service, we would hear from Michael as described in an upcoming chapter.

### ***The Tombstone***

Before the service, I walked over to see Michael's gravestone. When the kids were young, I took them to a graveyard. We walked around and read the epitaphs carved into granite. I pointed out that these few words are all that is left to remember them by, but they are quite telling. Some are positive such as, "*He was a good man,*" or "*She*



*was a great wife and mother.*” Some had absolutely nothing written on them but their name and the dates of their birth and death. I suspect they were jerks.

The experience put life and death in perspective for all of us. It reminded us that, relatively speaking, we only have a short time on earth to earn something beautiful to be carved into our gravestones.



If you visit Michael’s gravesite, you will see an image of him snowboarding on one side and an image of his guitar on the other. Those who visit his site in the future will know Michael enjoyed life and was once an athlete and a musical artist. I think Michael would approve.

But it is not over. Not by a long shot. My Prodigal Son may not have made it home yet, but he is on his way to greet me, his family, and his friends. And when that happens, I will tell him exactly what the father of the Prodigal Son spoke to his son in Luke 15:24:

*“For this son of mine was dead and has come to life again; he was lost and has been found.’ And they began to celebrate.”*



## CHAPTER 21

### A TRIBUTE TO MY BIG BROTHER



Michael's sister Nicole, wrote the following as a tribute to her big brother Michael.

This was really hard to write. The first time I wrote this message was 3 weeks after my son was born and 5 weeks after I lost my only brother. I thought it be easier to write this time around, but it wasn't. I want to do him justice, but I can't no matter how much I try. I love my brother and miss him every day! I want to capture EVERYTHING, but I can't fit a person's life in a short message. I wish I could!

I hope everyone got to see the video, which was beautifully put together by my cousin Brian. Michael's face and his voice—it feels like he is still here. And he kind of is! I really believe Michael

*continues* to show up in our lives reminding us he is still here, just not on this earth.

I think every little sister looks up to her older brother and wants him to like her. I grew up always wanting Michael's approval and wanting him to accept me as being cool for as long as I can remember. But I think he always saw me as his little sister. For this reason, I know he kept me at an arm's distance when it came to the struggles he faced with addiction.

When he was a senior in college at the University of Florida and I was a freshman, I saw him drinking a beer at a local restaurant, and he broke down in the middle of the bar. He felt terrible, he told me over and over. I remember he walked me to my car, and I think he even started crying when he saw me cry. So yes—in the future, I don't think he wanted me to know how much he struggled.

This worked out because, when we saw each other, we could just pretend we were normal brother and sister. He would continue to pick on me like always, and I would try to act cool even though we both knew I wasn't. It brought some normalcy to a tough situation.

Michael and I had some very sweet moments growing up. I know most of my cousins may not believe me, but I promise he could be a very sweet brother. I want to share some of my favorite memories with you.

When we were younger, every weekend was full of adventure. When we lived in California, we would spend most every weekend at the beach fishing at the pier. If you ever wondered where Michael's love for the ocean/fishing came from, it was from these weekends. I can still hear Michael screaming "*Dad, I got a bite! I got a bite!*"

My dad and I would rush over and reel it in. We would get our ruler out. I think most of them were about 4-6 inches...but either or, it was so much fun! On the way home, Michael and my dad would often pretend they were lost—or maybe they truly were. I would cry and be scared, but my brother lived for the adventure. We ended up in a lot of interesting places on these trips.

My parents would read to us or tell us stories every night. Dad often read the Bible to us, but he would not read me some of the Old Testament war stories. He only read those to Michael, as he was older, and I know that made my brother feel special. My dad would also make up stories about Popples to make me happy. (Do you remember them? They were strange little stuffed animals that would also turn into balls.) But then my dad would have Freddie Krueger eat them at the end to make my brother laugh. My dad was sooo good at making these stories up on the go! We would laugh so hard.

Michael loved science since he was young. It makes sense that he became a chemical engineer. Honestly, I always thought he would be a meteorologist. My favorite childhood memory with Michael as a child was in St. Louis. There were many bad storms that would carry on for hours. So when there was a bad storm at night and I couldn't sleep, I would go into Michael's room. He would have his little weather radio listening to the weather updates. He would really explain all the science to me and what the weather updates meant, and he made me feel important. I was just happy he was letting me sit in his room with him and talking to me like a friend.

Growing up, my parents were awesome at exposing us to new adventures and life experiences. They really did a great job of raising us overall. Unfortunately, I know both my parents constantly recount what they did right and wrong and wonder if there was anything they could have done differently. I would give anything for my parents to realize it wasn't their fault. AND I KNOW Michael is in heaven saying the same thing. My parents always built us up and made us feel special. There was never a doubt in our minds that our parents didn't love and support us.

After Michael's death, I asked his friends to send me some stories—and seriously, please continue to send us stories. It brings a lot of comfort, and we get to learn something new about him! A former roommate shared that one night she was crying because she lost two close friends within 1 week, and Michael came down the stairs and started crying with her! She said, "Looking back, I can see that what he was trying to do was connect. He had his own sadness and also wanted to support me in mine, but didn't know how to receive it. I

wish I had been more patient with him and the things he was going through, too.”

A friend from college said, “One of my main weaknesses has always been punctuality—and more generally, consistency. I NEVER would have passed Chemistry class without Mike. He would show up at my apartment early the day of the lab, and MAKE me get out of bed. This is just one example of the many ways Mike helped me to improve myself. Mike helped me do things I would not have done otherwise, and he thereby saved me from much regret.”

I read so many stories of how he helped people in rehab get sober and also get in shape. Michael was constantly trying to make other people the best versions of themselves, although (internally) he was struggling so much! I love my brother and always will.

I really hope you all continue to hear Michael’s voice like he was just here yesterday. What would he be telling you? Get sober, get healthy, work hard, live generously, live selflessly, or to not be a jerk? He wants you to be the best you! He’s just rooting for you up in heaven right now.

It hurts so much to know how much he hurt and suffered in his life. His addiction was like cancer, and he was in the terminal stages of it. I know he is suffering no longer. Like the lyrics said in his slide show, “*When I get where I'm going, there'll be only happy tears. I will shed the sins and struggles I have carried all these years. And I'll leave my heart wide open. I will love and have no fear. Yeah, when I get where I'm going, don't cry for me down here.*” We will meet up again soon, Michael!

## CHAPTER 22

### MICHAEL FROM THE OTHER SIDE

Michael left two messages behind on his computer. He knew I would get into his laptop and he would be right. The first one describes his most bitter defeat with addictions. He left this poem for those who may learn and benefit from it.

#### *Michael's Poem of Struggle*

*“Addiction is the worst disease you could ever hope for. Ask yourself... What if you could just engage in promiscuous sex again and you would temporarily be cured of all of your AIDS.*

*What if you could pay money to relieve you of your diabetes temporarily?*

*What if you could just buy, borrow or use something that would cure all of your ills just for the moment. especially when things were at their worse.*

*This is not an option for the terminally ill. This is not an option for the genetically or medically afflicted.*

*For the addict you are surrounded by the cure to all of your immediate ills.*

*To deny this immediate solution is one of the hardest things you will ever encounter. When something so enticing sits in the palm of your hand with the draw and illusion that temporary relief will lead to a trajectory in life. propelling you in the direction...(and it ends there).”*

Michael is calling out addiction for what it is; cruel and taunting. He believed the only way he could find some relief from it, as temporary as it may be, was to consume what got him into his

miserable state in the first place and thus guaranteeing he would never be set free from it.

***Letter to Dad***

*“Dad, I never knew my life would get to this point. I am slowly losing everything due to something I thought I could never become. My denial has led me to death’s door on so many occasions it’s just a matter of time, unless I whole heartedly accept that I can never ever have a drink again.*

*My being stubborn has played into my favor in many instances like every time someone says you can’t do something (as long as this is in a constructive environment) and I take on the challenge. In this case my being stubborn is destroying my life and affecting everyone around me and that was never my intention.*

*I realize that I cannot fight fate. I never intended to hurt anyone and never drank in order to do anything other than alleviate my own social anxiety and fears.*



## CHAPTER 23

### WARNING SIGNS

Looking back on Michael’s life, there were warning signs I didn’t pick up on. But even if I did spot them, there is no guarantee my response would have been sufficient enough to prevent the outcome. However, had I known what I know today, I would have reacted to them quite differently.

There is one thing I know for certain. The sooner you begin monitoring and having adult conversations with your child about drugs and alcohol, the better chance your loved one has to escape addiction.

There is no better time for parents to impose themselves on their children than when they are teenagers and in high school. Then, it is still possible to pry into their lives, monitor their web searches and their car’s location with GPS tracking.

Although they will certainly complain about their invasion of privacy, followed by lashing out at you and telling you don’t trust them, *so what?* You shouldn’t trust them. They haven’t seen what I have and what you may witness if you don’t stay on top of them.

Deep down, they know you have their best interests at heart, even though they will joyfully complain to their friends about what a terrible parent you are.

Should a parent follow the above advice, make sure you tell your kids upfront what the conditions are before you hand anything over to them, such as a cell phone, computer, the car keys, etc. Let them know in advance you will be watching, prying, butting in to their lives, and access their web browser, etc., and if you find something

disturbing as a result of their use, they lose their privilege to them until their repentance is genuine.

If you wait until they go away to college to monitor their lives, it will be too late. Parents can never compete with the influences of campus life. It's now or never. Someday when they are raising teenagers, they will not only be thankful for your persistent oversight, they will be grateful for showing them how to do it.

### ***Internet Trail***

If your children are living at home, see where they go online by checking their online browser history. This is not the time to be timid. Tell and show them what lengths you will go to protect him/her.

### ***What's On TV?***

Looking back, I realized the characters on TV influenced Michael even in his thirties. When the hit show, *Breaking Bad* came out, he talked to me about it all the time. I decided to watch the entire series to understand why it was so popular. He was right; it was entertaining, but also disturbing.

Michael started to act and behave like Jessie, one of the main characters of the show. Jessie was a significant and likable character of the series who cooked and got hooked on meth. Jessie's life was spiraling out of control from one show to the next, making addiction look simultaneously desperate but cool at the same time. This show had a significant effect on Michael. He didn't like who he had become, so he changed character. In a sense, he became Jessie.

### ***Rock Star Influences***

I recently spoke to Michael's roommate, who indulged in the same lifestyle as my son did in college. I asked him, "*Why did you guys do hard drugs and drink excessively? You were both smart and knew the dangers involved.*" I was surprised when he told me they were both influenced by some of their favorite rock stars.

He and Michael indulged in heroin and cocaine along with massive amounts of alcohol, just like their favorite rock stars did. Michael and his roommate even started their own rock band. They called

themselves “*The Predictable Chimps*,” Thankfully, they weren’t popular enough to follow.

I hope the reader can appreciate the power of influences. These two smart guys in college were so easily influenced by rock stars (and their alcohol and drug use) along with fictional movie/TV characters.

### ***The Day the Music Died***

Music is a warning. When sad, Michael would listen to dark music, which echoed his mental and emotional state. Toward the end, they all seemed very dark as he had become.

When Michael picked up his guitar and sang, he was safely telling his listeners where he was and where he was going.



I should have paid more attention to his songs, but again, one can’t always monitor an adult in his thirties. But if your child is young enough, listen to the music they are playing. It may warn you where their mind is heading, giving you time to intercede on his/her behalf.

My deceased brother-in-law also died young following two heart bypasses. He began to smoke cigarettes after these most-significant surgeries, even though he knew the dangers of doing so with his serious heart condition. He told me once that his favorite song was “*Only the Good Die Young*.” As absurd and emotionally immature as it might sound, singing that song reminded him he was good and would gladly die to prove it. Soon thereafter, he died in his mid-thirties.

Between job assignments, Michael would stay at home with us. When he was in the shower, I could hear him *singing* “*Moon*

*Shadow.*” He loved that song. The lyrics include being “*found by the faithful light*”—a light which he hoped would find and save him.

Michael’s friend sent me a list of songs he played frequently. I listened to them all. I felt they were dark and depressing, and the music was horrible. But I believe he connected with the lyrics. They conveyed self-pity, loss, and fear.

Go online and read the lyrics of these songs for yourselves and see how you feel for the rest of the day. These are the songs he was listening to the last few years of his life—over and over again. For those connecting with the Lyrics of these song, it is time for introspection examining your thoughts and feelings.

“Heaven Beside You” by Alice In Chains

“Lithium” by Nirvana

“Drain You” by Nirvana

“Aerials” by System Of A Down”

“Mother” Danzig” by Red Hot Chili Peppers

“Aerials” by System Of A Down

I won’t cite the lyrics exactly, but in essence, my summary of them below are the messages they carry to your child.

*Heaven may be close, but it is hell that reigns inside you.*

*My life is all that matters and is my job to drain you for my benefit.*

*You won’t see the light, but if you want to see hell, I’ll take you.*

*Heaven may be close, but it is hell that inside you.*

I’m sadden that Michael and others identify with such music. Listening to these songs’ lyrics is guaranteed to dampen one’s spirit.

### ***An Unusual Warning***

Some warnings might surprise you. When Michael was in his senior year in high school, his teacher was explaining how the stock market works. One of the assignments included playing the stock market with fake money.

In a few days, Michael was all jacked up and told me that his portfolio held the highest monetary value than anyone else in the class. This experiment went on for two weeks. When it ended, I asked Michael how he did. He explained he lost everything as he took on risky stocks, etc. to obtain a multi-millionaire portfolio quickly, but it just didn't work out.

When he told me what happened, it didn't surprise me. I sort of expected the outcome. His whole life was "*all in*" or "*all-out*," and it wasn't a good sign. It was a warning to what was to come as he rolled the dice with his life until it went bankrupt.



## CHAPTER 24

### HAPPY BIRTHDAY

One year from the day of his death, there was a very dangerous hurricane that caused over 70 deaths and four billion dollars in property damage. The name given to this storm was “*Hurricane Michael*,” and it brushed safely by his family now living in the Tampa area... on October 10th, Michael’s birthday. Coincidental as this may be, it is fun to speculate that maybe Michael wanted us to know he is very much alive and watching over us.

#### ***From Nicole and Michael’s Nephew Caleb***

*“Happy Birthday Michael Cannell!! I can’t believe “Hurricane Michael” is hitting on your birthday (October 10th)! You definitely wanted everyone to remember you! Your name is on every headline, at least here in Florida!*

*Caleb and I got some Shark skater vans shoes and watched kids skate at the skate park to remember you this year! I hope you would be proud! Miss you every day! Thanks for watching over us. I love my brother and always will! Miss you, but will see you soon!”*

#### ***From one of Michael’s Closest Friend***

*“Michael Cannell, it’s been a year. 365 days without my ultra-fit, smart-mouthed, overly intellectualized best friend. The man who taught (well, tried) to teach me about nuclear fission. Thanks to you, I know to always keep nuclear material underwater (idk how I’ll ever have a practical use for the knowledge lol).*

*God I loved you, you were so special. I still have the watch you gave me because I never knew what time it was.... you took it off your wrist and said, now you’ll never have to ask anyone what time it is. The batteries ran out a year ago, and I won’t change*

*them. They're frozen in time along with you. I know you're smiling down on us from a better place. I love you Michael; you really made me understand the quote that "God only takes the best." I'll see you one day."*



## CHAPTER 25

### HOW WILL HE BE REMEMBERED

Following Michael’s death, we received many beautiful testimonies about my son. I never realized how many friends Michael had and how many he touched. There are too many testimonials to cite them all. I took excerpts of testimonials that best reflect who Michael became to his friends and family. These are unedited; enjoy what his friends wrote about my son.



- ❖ *Michael’s heart was huge—both to his credit and sometimes to his detriment—but I will always remember him as an ultra-caring and dependable friend. Mike would do anything for me or any of his friends, and I couldn’t have made it through some difficult times in Louisiana if it were not for him.*
- ❖ *I remember one day I asked you what time it was. You realized I didn't have my phone on me and asked why I didn't have a watch. I explained how I just had never gotten around to getting myself a nice one. Immediately, you started fussing with your wrist and gave me your watch. “You might have*

*to get it adjusted to fit, but everyone should have a watch.” And that's the guy I'll always remember. You had such a big heart. I miss you so much.*

- ❖ *My heart sunk immediately after reading message after message... from his stay at my house, I lived and saw how this atrocious and horrid disease had a hold on him. At that time, he had his best intentions to overcome it, so it brings me sadness to hear he is no longer with us. I'm not sure words describe what I feel for him passing away, though I choose to remember him in good memory. He was someone I admired... he was a bold man, a strong man, adventurous, who brought joy everywhere he went.*
- ❖ *He had so many amazing qualities. I truly loved him. We would get together from time to time, and we had some of the most amazing conversations and moments together. We would both cry over just seeing each other.*
- ❖ *In 2009, I was involved in a bad car accident with Rob and a couple other friends in the car. When Mike found out how long I would be in the hospital for, he gave me his iPhone to use to keep me distracted from my injuries and to help me pass the time. I mean, who lends their brand-new and extremely expensive iPhone to a friend to use for 18 days?! I needed a new car immediately, but I was not in shape to undertake looking for a car right away. When Michael found out, he let me borrow his for over a month until I got back on my feet. Mike had a heart of gold, and I'll always cherish the memories of everything he did for me.*
- ❖ *Mike comes running into our small Office in a huff, throws his bag down, rips off his shirt and his cap and puts on a spare shirt that was hanging in the Office (I don't think it was his?). Then he stuffs his shirt/cap into his bag and sits down in his chair and pretends he's hard at work. A brief*

*moment later, a Site Safety guy barges in looking for someone who violated safety rules. Mike then starts giggling. He had forgotten to take his hard hat and high-vis safety vest home with him the night before, and so this morning, he had to run through the Plant with no safety gear to reach our Office. A safety guy is in pursuit of the offender. Once again, he never got caught.*

❖ *I remember while being in Columbia, I worked in the O&M department, which had hired Mike's services as a tech consultant. At that time, I was a cautious engineer, a "greenhorn" in the space. On the another hand, there was Mike: a "Cowboy" engineer—smart, confident, straight to the point.*

❖ *Memories of Michael always include laughter, energy, fun. I thought about specific memories, but I guess there isn't one particular moment I recall as much as just his presence. He was a sweet, caring person even until the end. We all loved and are grateful for his life...From Uncle Chris.*

As his father, I choose to remember him on top of a mountain and at his best.





## CHAPTER 26

### A FRIEND LIKE ABRAHAM

Throughout the Bible, only one person is called a friend of God. He is also the one God chose to be “*the father of a multitude of nations*” (Genesis 17:4). We know him as Abraham.

Reading his story many times, I was not initially impressed with Abraham at all. Sure he followed orders to sacrifice his son, but at the last moment, God stops him. Though he has received accolades for his willingness to offer up his son, he never actually experienced such a loss, nor the grief associated of losing his son.

Also, I wasn't impressed with his faith. If he had any, he sure didn't show it when he gave his wife Sarah over to foreign kings to save his own hide on two separate occasions. Two kings found his wife Sarah to be beautiful and wanted her for themselves.

When Abraham was approached by the king's messenger, he responded that he was just her brother, and not the husband so as not to be killed. And, the first king did have sexual relations with her. It seems like Abraham was a bit of a coward.

He didn't even seem to have faith that God would give him a son through his wife Sarah, even after God personally told him He would. Growing impatient, he had relations with Sarah's handmaiden, and an Egyptian woman, Hagar, which resulted in the birth of Ishmael. Sarah does finally give her husband a son of their own and named him Isaac. Years later, both Ishmael's and Isaac's descendants were at war; a war that is still going on to this day.

So why is he God's friend? I have a theory. I believe it was because he was not selfish and because he was a man of integrity.

### ***You Choose the Best Land***

When one of Abraham's brothers died, he left his son "Lot" behind. Being a family man, Abraham took the responsibility of raising Lot, a child that was not his own, which is admirable.

When Lot became a man, he had much livestock as did Abraham. Because there was so much livestock between them, it became difficult to know who was the owner of a number of them. As a result, there was strife between Abraham's and Lot's herdsmen. In response, Abraham told Lot they must part ways to avoid more conflict.

Abraham asked Lot to choose where he wanted to go and settle. Out of kindness and a heart of generosity, he allowed Lot to choose first. Out of self-interest, Lot chose the best spot with plenty of water which was deemed "*as beautiful as the garden of the Lord*" (Genesis 13:10). Unfortunately for Lot, Sodom and Gomorrah also lived within this same garden, and I think we all know what happened to those two cities. Lot eventually had to leave and find refuge elsewhere.

Before God destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah, Abraham pleaded and bargained with God to change His mind. He argued to God that there were still righteous people there who would die. I bet God was impressed with his compassion for people he likely never knew.

### ***A Family Man and One with Integrity***

Being a family man, when Abraham heard Lot and his family were taken captive and their possessions were stolen by foreign kings, he and his men bravely fought to rescue them (Genesis 14:14-16). He also saved others, including the King of Sodom, who offered Abraham the goods stolen from him as a reward. Abraham refused. He didn't want people believe the King of Sodom was responsible for his success. That honor went to Abraham's God. Abraham was not greedy and proved to be a man of integrity.

When Abraham's wife died, he wanted to bury her in the best of all places. He chose a field and a cave on the land of the Hittites, who offered it to Abraham for free. He insisted on paying full price for it, then he buried his wife (Genesis 23:7-9). He wasn't the type of

person who bargained for the cheapest price. He had too much class to behave in such a manner.

I think Michael is God's friend as well. From the testimonials recorded, Michael gave money, watches, his phone, and his car to people in need for nothing in return. If anyone knew Michael, they knew he loves his family and friends and would fight to protect them. I know it may sound like a bit of a stretch, but there are some admirable qualities Michael shares with Abraham.

I now know why Abraham and Michael are friends of God.





## CHAPTER 27

### DAD'S AFTERMATH

After Michael's death, I stayed up almost every night in a comatose-like state of mind. During this time, I had hoped to feel God's presence and peace as some people describe following a loss of a loved one. I never felt His presence, but I sure could have used the company at that time.

I rarely left the house and would stay up night after night watching accounts of Near-Death Experiences (NDEs) to give me hope that there will be a time when Michael and I reunite.

Five weeks after Michael's death, I began to lose it. My pain from my stroke in 2010 was raging on my entire right side. The best way to describe my post-stroke pain is to imagine laying the right side of your body on dry ice. For me, I couldn't tell if the sensation was hot or cold, but it hurt like hell. Even pain medications were not effective during this time.

I was becoming suicidal. Having read about every type of suicide technique I could find on the internet, I believed carbon monoxide from car exhaust was the easiest and the least painful way out for me. I didn't have the nerve to do it at once, so I thought I would normalize the experience by inhaling gas exhaust a little bit more each time I went to the garage after Carol left. I only did it one time. I just couldn't do this to my family and my parents.

Instead, I met with my doctor, who had me admitted for observation at a nearby facility overseeing others with suicidal thoughts. The experience was horrible. There was no attempt to help me nor anyone there. The only goal of the facility was to treat its patients as if they were on a suicide watch. Some people there were in just terrible condition. One woman had attempted to slit both sets of

arteries on each arm. She was so drugged up and had bandages all over her arms. It was just awful.

Some kids there falsified their mental state to get a bed and some free food for a few days. I wanted out. I saw the light and it wasn't in there. On my third day, I was released on my 64th birthday. Still, in a state of depression and pain, I went home to grit it out. A friend of ours brought me a marijuana cigarette to help with my pain. It didn't work.

### ***When You Least Expect It***

Months after my son's passing, I often cried, but I did so in a controlled manner. Almost at will, I could stop crying when around others who I didn't want to see me sad. But then there were times when something hit me so hard, I had no choice in the matter. The first time I experienced such an incident occurred shortly after a football game.

My family and I are big Ohio State University (OSU) football fans. I became one when I was 15 years old when my cousin played as a quarterback for the Buckeyes (Ohio State's Mascot). On August 31<sup>st</sup>, 2017, the Ohio State football team played their first season game and defeated Indiana 49 to 21. I watched the game downstairs with my friend and fellow Buckeye fan Gil.

After Gil left for home after the game, I went upstairs to my bonus room. Something was bugging me; I was feeling sad all of a sudden but didn't know why. Then I glanced at my cell phone looking for a text.

When Michael was alive, it didn't matter where he was; anytime Ohio State won, he would always text me to let me know he watched the game and was giving me a Buckeye salute. But there was no text. Then it hit me. He really is gone. At this time, I experienced an emotional cry more intense than the one I experienced at Michael's memorial service.

### ***Moving On***

There was a bundle of joy waiting for us shortly after Michael's death. God gave us a beautiful grandson, Caleb. At first, I didn't care to be around him. In some way, I wasn't going to give God the

pleasure of thinking He could make things right by replacing my son with a newer model.

I didn't feel that way for long and was thankful for our new addition to the family. To this day, I still mourn that Michael will never meet his nephew Caleb nor his niece Ellie until much, much later.

Michael would have been such a great Uncle to his nephew Caleb and his niece Ellie. They would have idolized him and begging him for just one more back flip. He would have taught them a lot more than a flip; he would have bought their first skateboards, teach them to play the guitar, and so much more.

I can't adequately express how big of a loss it is to accept the reality that some of the best memories "*to be*" will never materialize.

Eventually, I came to grips with it, knowing the best I can do is just tell his nephew and niece all about their Uncle Mike when they are older. Maybe I would even write a book about Michael and dedicate it to them. They would have adored each other.



# CHAPTER 28

## NEAR DEATH EXPERIENCES

### *Part 1 A World Beyond Our Own*

I have always been interested in those who claim they were dead, went to a world much different and more beautiful than ours; only to be told they must return to earth to complete their mission.

Near Death Experience(s) (NDE) seem to follow the same pattern regardless of one's faith and throughout history. Someone dies and is immediately pulled through a dark tunnel, and at the end of it, they see a bright light which draws them into a lovely new world filled with warmth and love. They describe seeing deceased relatives and friends, and do not want to leave this paradise setting, but they are told they must leave and return to earth until they run their course. Then, and only then they can return.

Some of those who experience NDEs describe being given a life review, where they see many of their shortcomings and are sent back to earth to remedy them.

As noted in the previous chapter, following Michael's death, I stayed up many nights watching testimonies of people who claimed to have experienced NDEs. I looked to them to give me hope that Michael and I will someday reunite in a much better place where he is healed, full of life, and at peace. They consoled me.

I've read and studied NDEs long before my kids were born. They intrigue me, and I am not alone.

## *NDE History*

As far back as 5,000 years ago, Egyptians were consumed with Near Death Experiences and the afterlife. To get a better understanding of what lies beyond this world, they experimented by suffocating slaves to death, only to resuscitate them back to life. When (or if) they returned, the slaves delighted their masters by telling them what they saw beyond the veil. The longer the person was dead, the more vivid their accounts would be.

Through trial and error, the Egyptians attempted to find the maximum time a person could remain dead before they reached the point of not being able to return. I can only imagine how many slaves died as the Egyptians attempted, through trial and error, to discover how long they could be without oxygen, die and then return back to life.

Once the optimal length of time for being dead was determined, they would subject future Egyptian rulers to the process of death and resurrection. They were sealed in a coffin only to be brought back as an enlightened one (presumably) better prepared to rule his people. Both the slaves and Egyptian leaders described the same near death experience of being drawn to a bright light, which they called the light of Osiris.

NDEs are as common as sunsets and are experienced by those of all faiths—even atheists. In St. Louis, I became friends with one of my neighbors. He is a medical doctor who works in the emergency room. One afternoon, he told me of his own NDE. Years earlier, he drowned and was found dead. Through CPR, he was resuscitated back to this world. When he returned, he shared a story from the other side.

He claimed to have seen the beauty of the afterlife and was greeted by Jesus Himself. Contrary to my expectation, he wanted me to understand that even after meeting Jesus, he was not a Christian and did not plan on converting. I am still scratching my head at his response, but I believe his story. I knew him for years, and the fact that he is a medical doctor with no allegiance to any faith makes his NDE account both unique and credible to me.

### ***Medical Explanations***

Many in the medical field discount NDEs. They believe the dying are experiencing a delusion; one that makes them welcome death as opposed to resisting it. To them, NDEs are nothing more than a benefit of evolution giving false hope to the dying so they don't fight death—but welcome it.

### ***It's a Miracle Indeed***

I try to keep up on the latest medical and scientific studies on NDEs. To no surprise, there are two camps with polar opposite viewpoints based upon the same research. I try to remain unbiased, but I believe (many) NDEs are real, but not just because of the accounts of seeing bright lights, relatives, etc.

I believe many of them because psychologically, many of those who have experienced an NDE are changed. They return with a whole new way of thinking and begin to look at their lives differently and understand their role in life is for the benefit of others and not just themselves. This sudden change reminds me of the transformation of Ebenezer Scrooge.

In the Christmas story "*Scrooge*," Ebenezer is described as a miser of a man whose only interest is his pocketbook. Ghostly visits from his tyrannical deceased boss, and the spirits of Christmas Past, Present and Future convince Scrooge that what's important is love and caring for the needy. These visits changed his life immediately. He instantly changes from a miserable person into a kind man who shares his money with those in need of it. Scrooge saw the light and returned as the opposite of his old self.

Many who experience an NDE often change, and do so immediately like Scrooge. Before, they were self-centered, but they return with a heart for others. Some quit their jobs and seek out employment serving the poor for just pennies on the dollar of their previous job.

Seeing the benevolent impact NDEs have on so many people, I am convinced they are miracles indeed. This transformation of the soul is what tipped the scales for me to become an NDE believer, because I know how rare it is for one to change so completely, so immediately, and for the benefit of others.

There is a medical study that may help us understand such a transformation. One researcher examined the brains of those with NDEs through MRI images. He concluded their brains were structured differently than they were before their NDE.

What has recently upset non-believers was the publication of Eben Alexander's book, *"Proof of Heaven."* Being a Neurosurgeon, he describes in great detail his personal NDE journey. As described by Gideon Lichfield, he believes Eben Alexander's stuck a nerve with the field of science and medicine as follows:

*"It was Alexander who really upped the scientific stakes. He studied his own medical charts and came to the conclusion that he was in such a deep coma during his NDE, and his brain was so completely shut down, that the only way to explain what he felt and saw was that his soul had indeed detached from his body and gone on a trip to another world, and that angels, God, and the afterlife are all as real as can be."*

Regardless of whether one believes in NDEs or not, many scientists are hard at work to find what they believe are other dimensions outside of our own world; those being height, width, and depth. Some of these scientists even hold out the possibility that there may even be parallel universes.

In hopes of determining that other dimensions exist, scientists have been colliding molecular particles into each other at almost the speed of light inside a 17-mile tunnel-like structure located near Geneva, Switzerland. At such speeds, scientists are hoping to propel some of these particles into another dimension.



Imagine that—scientists believe there is likely more beyond our world to discover, and I couldn't agree more. It will be a great day when Science and Faith converge as one.

### ***Family Reunion***

For me, the best part of NDE accounts is not the bright light through a distant tunnel, and the beauty of this dimension. The best part will be reuniting with deceased family and friends. NDEs give me confidence Michael is just on the other side waiting for me to complete my calling.



# NEAR DEATH EXPERIENCES

## *Part 2 I Want to Stay*

### *Why Wait?*

Most NDE accounts end with disappointment when the person discovers they must return to earth. Selfishly, I'm glad they returned; if they hadn't, there would be no such thing as an NDE as nobody would come back to tell us about what lies beyond this world. Their return has given many of us hope for a better day.

But I am sure those who returned weren't happy about it at all. Those enjoying what they experienced on the other side, do not want to return— and who could blame them.

The fact that we must complete our work “*here*” before we get “*there*” is difficult to comprehend. Why? I can only assume our time here affords us a unique opportunity to evolve into better selves and help others attain the same.

As I get older, I think it is possible that our descent on earth is our chance to test our metal for us and the whole world to see. It shows us who we are without prejudice. If we pass the test, we are rewarded with greater responsibilities here and beyond.

Let me attempt to explain this thought through two parables below.

### Parable 1 – Works and Rewards

Assume Michael is six years of age and his sister Nicole is three. I tell Michael that if he helps his sister pick up her toys, I will take him out for ice cream. Seconds later, the chore is complete and we are at a Baskin-Robbins enjoying an ice cream cone within the hour. Michael helped out of self-interest; he wanted something in return. His

behavior is reasonable, logical, and even encouraged. It is the way we humans operate here on earth.



### Parable 2 – Works with Nothing in Return

Now assume they are downstairs playing and Nicole is having difficulty picking up her toys and placing them where they belong. Michael looks at the mess and shakes his head. Assume I am watching from my balcony, and they don't know I am spying on them. I see Michael taking pity upon his sister and helping her clean-up for no apparent reason (i.e. ice cream) except love. As a dad watching from above, I want to give Michael much more than ice cream for his kindness.

The motivation for the act of helping his sister out of love and expecting nothing in return is HUGE and should not be underestimated. To me, motivation of such a person's response to one in need tells me all I need to know about him or her. I would put my whole trust in such a person, but not in one who is tallying up his earnings from what he or she deserves. In this world, balancing the books in terms of receivables and payables is understandable, but it's not admirable.

In this world, there are Givers and Takers. From my experience, it seems that takers are always taking and always in need as well. For givers, they rarely seem to "*be on the take.*" Instead they seem to be

content with what they have and give as often as they can to those in greater need than themselves.

In the example above, Michael's actions proved he believed (or had faith) that living for others is better than receiving a reward. His non-selfish action brought the two closer to each other and made their world a better place.

There are bigger things that await him as he proved faithful in a little. Sounds a lot like the following passage from the gospel of Luke, beginning in chapter 16:10 as follows:

*“He who is faithful in a very little thing is faithful also in much.”*

If you understand the moral of these two parables, then you know why this world is such a unique place. It is a place to show us who we truly are while at the same time giving us a chance to improve upon our very being. I believe if we prove ourselves faithful by successfully completing our work here on earth, we will be rewarded in the next life with responsibilities of such grandeur that we can't even imagine.

Matthew 25:23 summarizes this thought as follows:

*“His master said to him - Well done, good and faithful servant You were faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.”*

But not all people will be proven faithful. I have come across many bad actors during my career. They were not interested in ice cream. They want money—as much as they can grab from you and anyone else susceptible to them.

These types of people, are in a sense, marked men and women. They demonstrate who they are by their self-interest. Their time on earth has proven who they are, and though they are blind to Him on the balcony above, He is watching and is taking notes. He will be careful not to put them in charge of anything but themselves.

Above, I cited Luke 16:10, which spoke to the benefit of those who were faithful in a little, are rewarded with much. Now, let's listen to these words for those not found faithful and worthy.

*“He who...is unrighteous in a very little thing is unrighteous also in much. Therefore, if you have not been faithful in the use of unrighteous wealth, who will entrust the true riches to you? And if you have not been faithful in the use of that which is another's, who will give you that which is your own?”*

The unfaithful and greedy will not enjoy true wealth as they proved unwise and foolish seeking currency rather than integrity here on earth. I know such people and some of them tell me it is their belief (professed faith) that is important and that is all that matters.

Some of them are so confident their life story is of no consequence, they believe that once they die, they will go straight to heaven and receive crowns to wear upon their head with unimaginable heavenly wealth—simply because of what they believe as opposed to how they lived their lives. They are confused, thinking their belief is the same as having a living faith.

### ***Crowns You Say –How big and How Many?***

The Bible does refer to crowns for believers when they enter the next world. Some believe they will be receiving and wearing them because of their beliefs. They so miss the point.

Receiving a crown is simply a symbol of being considered worthy enough to *reign* here on earth and beyond if one completes their calling through trials and tribulation. It turns out that God is not only interested in one's faith. He seems much more interested in one's faithfulness, rather than one's faith, when assigning reigning positions.

### ***Responsibility to the Responsible***

I saw the above analogy play out when I was a general manager in Los Angeles responsible for 1,200 employees. It was a big deal to be given such an opportunity and responsibility, and to show all my employees I had their interest at heart—and indeed I did. I was given this responsibility because of the reputation I developed from the testimonies of past employers. Without them, I would never have risen up the ranks as I did. I was trusted and what a great feeling that is.

During my tenure as the general manager, I would often post job openings for management positions and I received many applications in response. Some of them came from Union employees, which I had hoped for.

I wanted to give opportunities to those who deserved to move up. However, there were a few resumes of known troublemakers who applied from the Union ranks. I had no intention of promoting them. If it wasn't for Union representation, they probably would have lost their jobs a long time ago. In the private sector, they would not be enjoying a steady job with stable pay. The Union "*saved*" them from termination, but they would never be allowed to move up the ladder.

They couldn't be trusted, and they proved it with their past. Similarly, there are a lot of religious people who may be "*saved*," from what they deserve, but they won't be rewarded a promotion in the life to come.





## CHAPTER 29

### I'M SORRY

It's been three years since Michael passed. I wish I had done things differently. If I had a chance to speak to Michael, I would apologize for how poorly I responded to him in both word and deed. How I wish I had told him how sorry I was. Given a second chance, I would have told him the following:

*Now- it's my turn to give my confession as I have given Michael's*

Michael, I didn't know how bad things were for you. If I had, I would have embraced you and pleaded you to come back home to work things out until you were back on your own two feet. But even if you couldn't stand on your own for the rest of your life, I would still be there for you.

I was unprepared. I didn't know what to do. I saw counselors and watched too much of Dr. Phil, who all said the best medicine was to kick you out on the street until you reached your bottom at which time you would see the error of your ways, repent of your sins, and return better than ever. What they didn't know is that for someone suffering as you had, there was no bottom to spring back from. As bottomless as your descent may have been, I would have reached down to bring you back and care for you as your mom did so well.

I want you to know that when your mom called me from the hospital the night before you died, I told her to bring you back home. I wanted to give us another chance, but you wanted to go back to your friend's home where you spent your last night here on earth.

#### ***Lock Out and DUI***

I know it had to have hurt when I changed all the locks on our house and changed the garage code so you couldn't get in. My motivations

for this action were mixed. I was trying to send a message that you aren't welcome until you stop drinking and taking drugs.

I was genuinely concerned that if you were home, especially when we weren't around, you would drive intoxicated as you had so many times before. I was scared that driving under the influence could jeopardize the lives of parents and kids and specifically those who lived in our neighborhood. During this time, one of your mother's friends had just lost her husband due to a drunk driver and it was fresh in both of our minds.

You were lucky not to have killed someone, but luck always runs out and I didn't want to see that play out in our neighborhood. As terrible as I would feel for someone you may have harmed or even killed from driving under the influence, I would also be terrified for you.

The thought of you being convicted and sentenced to prison for a long time or for the rest of your life is more than I could have endured. I don't think you could have survived jail. Some prisoners would have picked up on your vulnerable state as an opportunity to hurt and possibly sexually abuse you—something I could never have gotten over.

### ***My Apathy***

There was another time where I blew it. We were in Columbus for your cousin Jessica's wedding. At the reception, everyone was having a good time. You entertained with your amazing dancing and blew everyone away. I believe you graced us with a dance that I had never heard of before; I think it's called the "*electric worm*". My dad was quite impressed. I left the reception early to bring my parent's home. Their house was so hot that I went down to the cool basement to sleep on an old couch there.

It was late that night and you came downstairs eager to talk with me. You pulled up a chair and told me you slipped up and drank at the reception. You pointed to the back of your head and told me there is just something in your brain that makes you drink when you are around it, especially when you are with friends and family.

You were honest with me, and I didn't respond as I should have. I wish I had told you we would work through this fight no matter how long or difficult it would be, but I did not.

I remember sitting up on the couch and telling you, "*It's your life, and it's up to you to just say No.*" I remember being distant and emotionless. I recall acting nonchalant and telling you to just make up your mind and stop making excuses by blaming some part of your brain for your failures or whatever. It's your brain; take control of it. The discussion ended soon after that. I failed you. I don't think you ever approached me as honestly as you had that night again.

You approached me humbly, explaining that you fell off the wagon and wanted to get back on. You came to me for empathy and encouragement, and I failed to deliver. Of all of the conversations we ever had, I am most ashamed of this one. Someone told me the opposite of love is not hate, it's apathy and apathy is what I gave you that night, and I am so very sorry.

### ***It Is a Disease***

I also want to apologize to you for not acknowledging addiction as a disease that can't just be beat with will power. Knowing your strong personality, intelligence, and perseverance, I believed you would fight your way back. Back then, I thought labeling addiction as a disease was crap—merely an excuse for being weak and lazy instead of pulling yourself up by the bootstraps. I never believed addiction was a disease until too late, and I didn't know how bad of a disease you were suffering from until I read your poem on the struggles addicts endure.

### ***In Retrospect***

Like you, I beat myself up for things I wish I had done differently. I sometimes think I was just selfish not wanting to spend my retirement till death caring for you. Those thoughts did enter my mind but I assure you, towards the end, this was not the case. I saw you fighting to get better and never giving up and I knew you weren't doing this just for yourself. You were doing it for me, your family, and your friends.

I know you were fighting desperately to beat your addictions and I so admire your efforts. I was especially touched by what you wrote to a friend after you admitted yourself to the rehab facility in Denver, and found some hope that you just might bounce back. Here is what you wrote:

*"I skate all the time and live in Denver now. I left my past life and it hasn't been easy and I can't say I haven't messed up, but things are turning around and **I'm helping out all kinds of people now**. I'm not trying to be a hypocrite but you're a talented guy and you're going to see some good breaks. I can't tell you how many people I know that have died this year and the number keeps going up. Don't lose faith."*

Listen to your words. You wanted to get well **so you could continue to help others out**. Such a statement wasn't just admirable, it was bold and spoke of your willingness and confidence to beat your addictions so you could help others defeat theirs.

Though things didn't work out as planned, know your efforts were not in vain. Just read what your fellow addict friends said and wrote about you. Your efforts did make a difference, and they are still having a positive effect upon your friends, and with this book, you may help a lot of people you don't even know.

Your Life Made a Difference—something many people will never achieve or understand.

When I shared your life's story with your Uncle Chris, he responded to me as follows:

*"I know you are very proud of Michael, especially with all the people he touched. 'Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.' In his broken spirit, in his brokenness, Michael was also beautiful."*

What a wonderful beatitude Uncle Chris wrote on your behalf. He acknowledges that from your brokenness, you left this world more beautiful than when you came to it, and during the worst of circumstances. You should be proud—I certainly am.

***Face to Face***

I wish I could have told you all of this when you were here with us, but it is just a matter of time before we meet again. When I arrive, I don't think I'll have any trouble spotting you. I'll just be looking for the tallest guy in the joint.



## CHAPTER 30

### MY COWBOY



I wish I could have interceded in some way to save Michael, but I couldn't. I wished for so many different outcomes.

I wish I could have convinced him to be a cowboy. He had no business being stuck behind a cubicle making meaningless schedules and checking his 401K every payday.

Once, my son was a man of adventure, a lover of creation, and a man full of laughter and joy. He needed to move West. Yes, looking back with what I know now, things might have been very different if Michael went West again. He loved the mountains, skiing, mountain biking, and just being in God's country.

*Maybe he would live on a beautiful 10-acre farm in Colorado living happily with his beautiful wife and children who all adored him.*

*Maybe he would teach his kids how to do backflips, snowboard, ski, play guitar, and paint pictures.*

*Maybe he would be a veterinarian caring for his animals and his neighbors'.*

*Maybe he would have worked with his kids to fight social injustices as he did in St. Louis.*

*Maybe he would have taught his kids how important God's love is and that it is their responsibility and opportunity to pass it on.*

*Maybe, he would take his family to snowboard on freshly fallen powder snow.*

*So many Maybes that could have been...*

*O God. How I wish he were that cowboy*





## **TO FAMILY AND FRIENDS**

Assuming you read this book from cover to cover, I hope you felt Michael's and my loss; enough so that you will do anything in your power to make sure it will never happen to you.

### ***The Power of Teenagers and Young Adults***

I hope this message reaches young men and women who truly love their family. Maybe if they understand the power they possess over their loved ones' lives and wellbeing, they will never choose to play with matches that burn down every relationship important to them.

How can I communicate to young people in high school and college that they have the power to protect, harm, or destroy the well-being of everyone in their family? And I mean everyone, including grandpa, grandma, uncles, and cousins. Their decision to walk on or walk away from the road my son chose will determine how much they love their family.

If you are one who is considering gambling with your life to feel a momentary and fading high and/or to fit in socially, realize you are not gambling with just your life. You are rolling the dice for your parents, loved ones and friends. Armed with the knowledge and warnings this book provides please rethink your decision. Show those who love you that you love them in return.

If that young person is you, please look yourself in the mirror. See if you have it in you to not to harm or possibly even destroy the lives of those who love you most. If you really mean what you write in your parents' birthday and Christmas cards with the word Love preceding your signature, then prove you mean it—walk away from what killed my son

### ***Parents and Guardians***

If you are a parent, loved one, or a guardian of an addict or one leaning in this direction, my heart goes out to you. I provided a number of lessons learned and warnings throughout the book for

your consideration. In it, I encourage a parent to “not be timid” or “*embarrassed*” to invade your kid’s privacy to save them. Someday they will thank you, and pass on your wisdom to their children and your grandchildren.

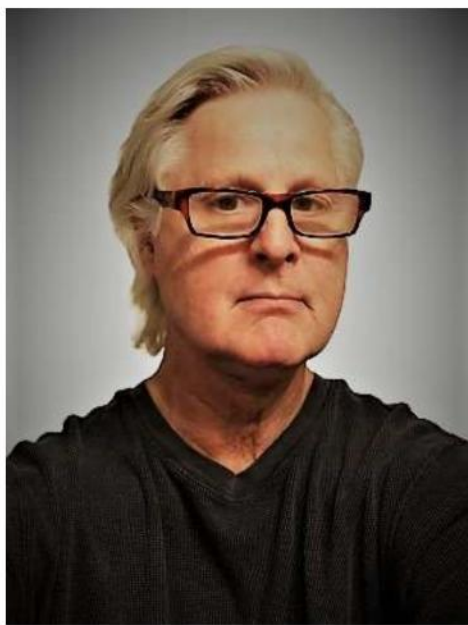
To those who have lost a loved one to addiction, it isn’t over. There really is a place “*over the rainbow*” which has been attested to by thousands if not millions throughout history who have already been there and returned to tell us about it via their Near Death Experiences.

Finally, if this book helps you or anyone to avoid the trappings of addiction from reading it, know you have given my son what he is praying for and wants most from where he is watching—meaning to his life. It is for this reason, he has been bugging and urging me through dreams and whispers to write this book—his book.

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While writing this book, a number of “*coincidental occurrences*” manifested. I did not include them in the book as I didn’t want to distract from the book’s mission statement of saving lives. For those who want to read them, simply contact me at [tosaynow@gmail.com](mailto:tosaynow@gmail.com). I also plan on including them in a website/blog I am developing at <https://www.havesomethingtosay.com/>

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Since Mr. Cannell retired from a very successful career in mass transit, he now enjoys a quiet life in Florida with his wife of 46 years.

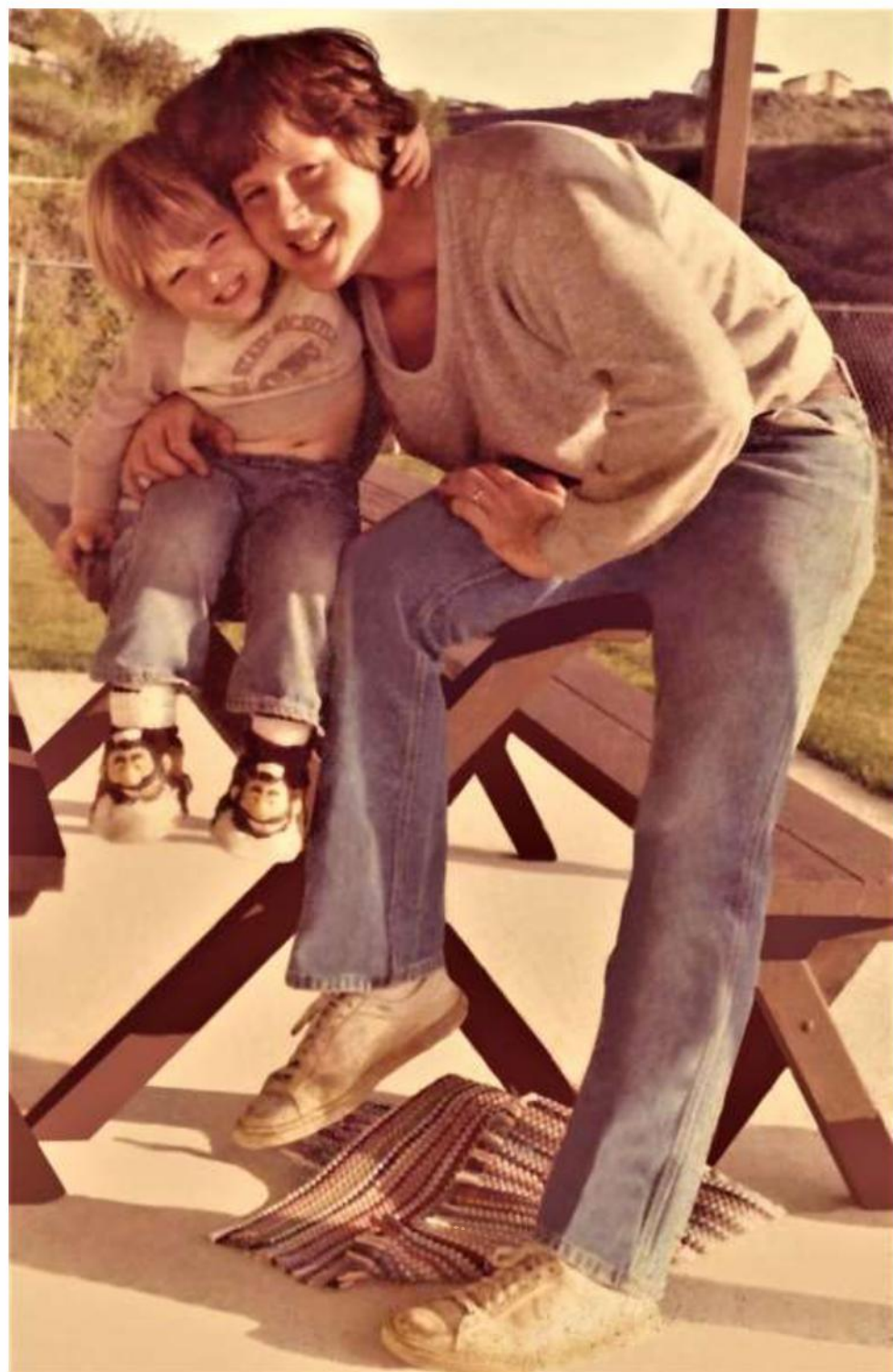
Both he and his wife Carol relocated from Orlando to Tampa to be by their daughter Nicole, who lives just a stone's throw away. She and her husband have given them two beautiful grandchildren who bring them a whole lot of joy and many smiles.

Mr. Cannell has written a number of stories during his life but shares them only with family and a few close friends.

It is unusual for him to publish anything, but after losing his firstborn and his only son, who was his pride and joy, he now has something important to say to those in need of it. He wants to reach those on the road to addiction, and to those who find themselves already there looking for a way out, to pay heed to what he offers in this book.

Michael's father wants to bring meaning to his son's life and believes Michael wants his dad to write his biography as a cautionary tale to those considering the same fatal journey he so regrettably took.

Mr. Cannell honored his son's request by writing this book—Michael's book; one they hope will benefit family, friends, and others from traveling down the journey that left him at a dead end. Both he and his son want to send a message; one that comes with a map keeping you and others from the deadly journey his son Michael so unfortunately took. He and his son Michael, like Doctor Spock, wants you to *"live long and prosper."*



**“My Prodigal Son and Our Journey Together” is a book written by the father of his son who tried and failed to beat alcohol and drug addiction. It is narrated by his father describing the difficult journey his son chose and one that he did not take alone. His family and loved ones were right there with him throughout his journey to support and love him on the way.**

**It is believed the best way to describe the spirit and purpose of this book is to hear from both the father and son below.**

*From Dad*

**“I experienced a loss that I still cannot come to terms with. My beautiful son, Michael, died three years ago. Prior to his tragic ending, he tried everything to break away from his addictions of alcohol and drugs, but nothing worked.**

**He was loved by many and befriended others suffering from the same disease as he did. His message to them is the same one he is sending through this book. In his very own words he described his journey as follows...”**

*From his Son Michael*

***“Dad, I never knew my life would get to this point. I am slowly losing everything due to something I thought I could never become. My denial has led me to death’s door on so many occasions it’s just a matter of time.”***