

These have been the saddest days of my life, so it's going to be difficult to share with you, but that fact that you are all here makes it less difficult. I'm probably going to cry and may not get through this quickly, but since you are our loved ones, I know you will understand. Even though I'm a speaker, I wrote out every word I wanted to say, so I don't forget anything.

I doubt any of you *don't* know, for reasons we'll never understand, Johnny took his own life on November 20. Johnny had struggled with and been treated for social anxiety and panic attacks for many years, and then later manic and depressive episodes. He hated how his prescribed medications made him feel, so as an older teen, he turned to weed and drugs to ease his mind, which likely contributed to more severe psychoses, which led to stronger drugs. He was admitted to multiple hospitals and treatment programs, saw many doctors, and tried different medications and even innovative brain treatments, but in the end, we tried so hard, but couldn't get in front of the runaway train of mental illness and drug addiction.

We purposefully didn't hide the fact that Johnny died by suicide, because there are more families struggling with mental health issues than we know. It seems that everyone we talk to has a story about suicide in the family. The prevalence among young adults is on the rise, so it's important to talk about it and bring attention to the issue.

As tragic as Johnny's suicide is, the MORE important thing is the life he lived before he made that decision. The FACTS of his life are less important than the STORY of his life—everything that came in between is what's important. I recognize that many of you here never met Johnny, and you know him a bit better after hearing from our family and his friends. You now know that Johnny loved the ocean, amusement parks, and animals. He had a spirit of service, a beautiful smile, and a kind heart.

As his mother, I think the best way I can tell you about who Johnny was is to share from his own words. Three months ago, we enrolled Johnny in his third university, Colorado Technical University, where he wrote a paper titled, "Values I Believe Are the Most Important." I'd like to share his five values and tell you a little story about how he exemplified each value and what we can learn from him. On your way out, please pick up a copy of his paper in his own words.

1. Altruism. Johnny said, "Practicing altruism is important because it helps benefit the whole of society and mankind. Also, being giving to other people will also help yourself in the end, because altruism promotes a brighter future for everyone. Helping other people helps yourself, and it just feels good." He really believed and acted on this value. Once he literally took the shoes off his feet and give them to barefoot homeless man. He volunteered at church; we taught Sunday school for preschoolers as a family for several years. He loved being a youth leader at the National Speakers Association annual conventions, giving back to a program he had gained so much from when he was younger. When Johnny was about 15, we were driving north on University a few blocks from here, and it was pouring rain. My wipers were going like crazy, and we stopped at a red light. A man was standing on the corner with one of those SALE signs for a local business, getting absolutely soaked. Without hesitation, Johnny reached down and grabbed my umbrella, rolled down the window and handed it to the guy. The light turned green, and I drove off. I blinked and looked at him and said, "Well, be prepared to be wet," and he said, "Well, he needed it more than we do." I looked back in my rearview mirror and saw the guy with the umbrella in one hand and the sign in the other, and knew he was right. So, when Johnny died, John and I instantly decided to donate his body to help others, because that's what he would have wanted. In death, Johnny has given life to others. His legacy will live on through the nearly two dozen people who will receive his bodily donations.

2. **Patience.** Admittedly, it was initially difficult for me to understand how patience could be Johnny's 2<sup>nd</sup> value, because he could be very impatient at times. On one of our vacations in Hawaii, his favorite place, we visited a place out in the ocean called Turtle Town, where a great many sea turtles lived. We were told, "Please don't swim to the turtles. Just be patient and wait, and they may come up to you. If they come up to you, please don't touch the turtles, just watch them." Of course, what does Johnny do? Swim towards the turtles AND touches them. I think he put patience because he WANTED to be more patient. He thought it was important and valued it. He said, "Patience is a very important virtue to practice, because if you expect immediate gratification from most things, often you will leave disappointed." When he wanted something badly enough, he would wait for it until it happened. Johnny and I loved Billy Joel. Who doesn't, right? For his 18<sup>th</sup> birthday, John and I decided that I would take him to NYC to see Billy Joel at Madison Square Garden. But then Billy had to have sinus surgery and rescheduled the tour. Then we had to cancel the 2<sup>nd</sup> attempt, but we finally got to see him when he came to Denver in August this year. We were right up front and sang along loudly, together. He told me, "Third time's a charm, right mom?" I told him his patience had won out.
3. **Conviction.** I was shocked in a good way on this one, because he used me as his example. I was so proud of him, and it turns out he was so proud of me. Johnny said, "I think conviction means showing confidence in what you believe in and know is the truth, and to stand by it. Though it may appear to be cliché and overdone, the biggest role model in my own life is my mother, Laura Stack. She is one of the most dedicated people I know to her profession, which is being an author and a speaker. She travels across the world, speaking about time productivity and using her books as references. She truly is the definition of a competent, assured professional, and she always believes in what she's doing. Her leadership skills that she's developed throughout her life have led her to where she is today and creating her own independently-run business, The Productivity Pro, and being a symbol of conviction to me and many others." He never said this to me while he was alive. So, to all the parents out there, we never know the difference we are making in the lives of our children and the strong impact we can have on them.
4. **Enthusiasm.** Johnny had a huge enthusiasm for learning. He was scary smart and creative and curious and philosophical and loved to debate topics that were over my head. He always hated it when I bragged about him, but now he's gone, so I'm going to brag. He got a perfect SAT score in the math section, and a 34 on the ACT, to which he complained about the poor wording on some of the answers in the English section. He tutored our neighbor's daughter in math over one summer, and she was able to test out of an entire year of math. He went to a camp at Stanford for a week to learn game design. He went to chess camps, robotics camps, and IDTech camps to learn various programming languages. He loved these experiences. He excelled in video games and was the highest rank in one of his favorites, CSGO. In high school, his GPA was so high that after nearly failing the last semester of his senior year with four D's when he was caught in the grip of drugs, he still graduated with high honors.
5. **Gratitude.** Johnny wrote, "Simply put, expressing gratitude is showing you're thankful for what you have, or a kind act." When several of his friends came to visit the house over the last few days, they expressed their love for Johnny and shared memories with us. They showed us such kindness by taking the time to come talk with us. We tried to express gratitude in return by letting them pick something that reminded them of Johnny—a sweatshirt he wore, a stuffed Ram that was on the dash of his car, his special gaming headset, or his longboard. Johnny was right—giving to someone else makes you feel good. And so many of you here today have given to our family in myriad ways. Today wouldn't be possible without the help of a lot of people who have come alongside of us.

There are so many we want to thank, which I have done and will do in person.

- Mark Shupe
- Mike Heflebower
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- The National Speakers Association Colorado and Las Vegas chapters
- My friend and videographer, David Achilles
- Nadine Balabanoff and Tessa Cornelia for coordinating the food we'll enjoy afterward
- Brian Walter and Sylvie di Gusto, who created the beautiful tribute video you're about to see
- Our family members and dear friends

You have all been so very supportive during this terrible time. We are forever grateful for these acts of service, your time, the cards and Facebook posts, the expense you went to, and mostly your prayers. You will never know how much everything has meant to us as we grieve. We have felt so comforted and surrounded by love.

We hope that you can see through Johnny's 5 Values how much he loved people and wanted to make a difference in this world. He was a smiling, talented, handsome, loving young man. I'm strengthened by the knowledge Johnny also loved the Lord. He was baptized as an infant, prayed with John when he was a young boy to ask Jesus into his heart, and chose again to be baptized when he was 12. We know that once you ask the Lord into your heart, he never departs from you. We are saved by grace through faith, and I know without a doubt that when he died, the Lord held Johnny in His arms and took his pain away. Johnny is no longer tormented, and we WILL see him again. May the grace of God cover our family as we work to put our lives back together again and create our new normal. It is in our pain that we know God is closest to us. Psalm 34:18 says, "The Lord is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit."

Even though our hearts are broken, God does give us something worth trusting in tough times. And that's Him, and Him alone. Hallelujah and AMEN.