

Even Death Shouldn't Stop Your Race!

By Sedaet Nazifi

Introduction

I am writing this in memory of my son Albert who died at the age of 16 years old from a brain aneurism. I feel the need to tell my story only for the purpose of helping others overcome the hardships of their life (which I call the maze).

When things out of the ordinary happen to us, we need some kind of direction! It feels like driving in a different country with no navigation or map. Each time you make a turn, it's the wrong way. You have no idea where you are going or how to get there so you end up in the middle of the maze and can't get out. It's not because of something that you did or didn't do, it's simply life making you ask that one question, "Why?"

Many times, I have seen people whether it be on the news, or people I know, end up in the maze. Overnight their life has changed. Sometimes, it's just their destiny or someone made it their destiny for no reason at all. I have been asked, "How did you get through it?" because there is no book with instructions on how to deal with this so you get stuck in the maze.

Walking in the maze

Preparation for the storm

I came to America young and pregnant from Macedonia. I was so happy to come to this beautiful country, the Land of Opportunity. I knew this was a great beginning to my new and happy life with my new baby and family full of opportunities. I was so determined that nothing was going to stand in my way. I had my baby, Albert, and five years later we had Robert. We were your average family next door.

When Albert was about two years old, I had a dream that someone pushed me into a dark room. In that room was Albert, all grown up, he was lying flat on a hospital bed with a spotlight in his face. At first, I didn't recognize him because he was all grown up, but in the dream, I knew it was him. I was calling for him but he wouldn't answer, he just laid still like he was sleeping. Then a voice came from the end of the bed, it was a man dressed like an orthodox priest, in black robes, wearing the typical headwear, and he said, "We will take him away from you." I woke up in a cold sweat, with my heart pounding out of my chest. My whole body was shaking, for I had just seen every parent's nightmare.

In my gut I felt like that had a meaning for my life, it stayed in the back of my head. I felt like at some point in my life I will lose him. I did everything not to, I prayed a lot but I mostly made time to be there for them. It was as if I knew that I had to make it count and if I didn't make use of that time, one day I would be sorry.

In fact, if you are a believer, your subconscious somehow knows what will happen to you, believer or not! We even begin to prepare for the event, without being aware of our actions. We start doing things out of the ordinary that don't even make sense, yet for no reason, it just feels normal. We are so busy that we fail to see the signs. I believe that is how God speaks to us and gently prepares us for our new journey, and when we don't understand things, we just call it weird.

I had gone through this phase in my life of buying dark clothes, blouses, scarfs and skirts and I hate dark clothes. I wouldn't even let my boys wear black t-shirts, even when they had the school football logo on it, just because they were dark in color. I would say that I need to have them in case of a funeral. I don't know how many funerals I was planning to go to. Amazing as it is, I didn't even wear any of the clothes I had bought even when I went to a funeral. I thought they were too dark. This was more apparent after Albert's death because I hated black and felt dark inside and that was plenty of darkness for me. Even though we are supposed to wear dark clothes in our culture after a death in the family, I didn't wear them.

Our boys were involved in sports all year-round. Football was Albert's dream life. He had his entire life based around it. His dream was that he would be the next Emmitt Smith. His efforts in school were also based around that. He needed to be a C-average student to be on the team, and our family standards were nothing lower than a B to stay on the team. Rules were not meant to be broken and if you did break the rules, you got disciplined. We made sure to follow through with our discipline even if it meant that us, the parents, also had to pay some price to stand up to our role as parents.

We supported Albert's passion; it also became ours. I was a soccer mom; everyone knew when the Nazifi's were at the game. I was my boy's cheerleader; they could hear me a mile away, even in the water. We tried to be involved, running the concession stand, setting up bake sales. Through all our busy schedules we never missed a game, meet, or concert.

We always made family time. That was very important!!! At our house, every Saturday was "Kid's Day." We ate what they wanted, we did what they wanted, even went where they wanted. We didn't always feel like doing it, but we stood with our promise to always be there for them. Our boys loved each other so much. I couldn't wait for them to grow up and have families of their own, because there was nothing that could tear them apart, or so I thought.

When I would be at work, they would play golf in the house and break the heads off my little porcelain dolls and they would put them back together like nothing happen. When I would be cleaning, their heads would fall off and they would laugh. I would ask, "What happened here?" they both would answer, "We don't know!" I had glued them back on so many times they looked like they were murdered. It was those times that made me happy to be a mom because I knew that they were having clean fun and loved each other so much that it was worth to see my dolls being broken again and again.

Every Saturday morning, they would put all the comforters, pillows, couch cushions and blankets together and play fort for at least two hours. Albert would tackle Robert and say to him, "I'm going

to tackle you now because you are such a beast and so strong that you will grow to be much bigger than me, this way I can beat you while I still can.” I would make them breakfast and we would sit and talk. For rest of the day, we would do whatever they had on the agenda. When my husband would get home from work, they would whisper to each other what they wanted to do, especially if they knew we wouldn’t like it, but we always had fun and what mattered was that we did it together.

They grew up so fast, it was as if one day they were two and the next day they are ten. Albert was a happy fun child. He played outdoors all day, he had light olive tanned skin all year round, thick curly brown hair to match his eyes and he would be always laughing about something because he was the cool kid. Being my first born I grew very close to him. It was as if we were one. We could sit in a room for a long period of time and walk out of there like we had the best conversation ever. He didn’t feel like my son, it was like he was my best friend. Yet, for as young as he was, he had a lot of wisdom and a heart of gold. He was very responsible; I could always rely on him to get the job done right. If he heard me talking about how someone is going through a rough time, he would always offer his money to help them, even if it was a very small amount, it was still something.

Because he thought he was the cool kid, once in a while I needed to teach him a lesson. His 13th birthday was coming up and he thought he was so clever. He told me to buy him a Nintendo system and he told my sister what kind of jeans to buy him. He thought he had everything figured out! I said “You can’t tell people what to buy you!” he said, “Why not? She is my aunt, and she asked me so I told her.” I said, “No! it is the thought of the gift that you have to appreciate.”

I thought to myself that I need to do something. my sister had already bought him the jeans that he wanted but I said, “Hold on!” we had a pair of Rustler jeans, you could use them as a pillar to hold up the house because they were so stiff, they would stand on their own. One of my brother-in-law’s co-workers gave them to him for a prank, so we wrapped them up as Albert’s jeans gift. When Albert was going through his gifts, he opened that gift last because he already knew what was inside. When he finally opened it, his face froze, his expression practically screaming, “What is this? Cool kids don’t wear these!” I broke the silence saying, “Why are you so surprised? You told her to buy you jeans, right?! So now go and try them on for us.” He did and I said, “Good! A perfect fit, you can wear them to school tomorrow.” Unsurprisingly, he didn’t as he was very disappointed. The next day we gave him the jeans he wanted. He apologized to my sister and thanked me for a lesson well taught.

He was huskily built. At the age of ten, he could easily pass for an 18-year-old and a lot of women treated him like he was that age. I always had to keep my eyes on him to remind people that he is *only 10!* He was loved by many, because he always treated everyone equal no matter where they come from or what they looked like. His friends came from all different cultures and that really pleased me about him. He worked very hard at school, mostly on the field. At the age of 16, he was about 5’9” and about 200 pounds, all muscle. He had a broad chest and shoulders. For as big as he was, he was a sprinter (believe or not). He was within the top ten fastest on the team.

His maxims, as created by Albert in Mr. Lareau’s English class in November 1999 were:

1. To be the best person I can be.
2. To be successful.
3. To be honest.
4. To work hard.

5. To die a happy man.

His head football coach, Brad Knoche, described him as: “Al was the type who was always positive and a leader in class. He never looked down on people. He enjoyed being a high school student. It was that, that I saw from him that made me happy.”

My outer family is mostly in Europe. We vacationed there every three years. It was pretty pricey so it was mostly me and the boys and a few times it was all of us. We would go to Greece, Turkey, and Albania to visit some family and go sightseeing for fun, but we were always together.

During the summer of 1999, me and the boys were getting ready for our trip to visit my family in Europe. The whole time I was getting ready, my stomach was in knots. For some reason, I felt this vacation was different from the others. Every time someone said, “Lucky! You are going on a nice vacation.” my response was, “No! I don’t want to go but I’m doing this because I have to!” When we were at O’Hare International Airport in Chicago, I started to cry really hard. My husband said, “Why are you crying? You will see your brother (who you love very much) and your family. What is bothering you?” My response was still the same, “I don’t want to go, but I have to.” My husband was appalled, “Who is making you go? If you don’t want to go! Don’t!” I kept repeating myself, “But I have to!” We couldn’t come to an understanding. They do say to trust your gut feeling and that’s what that was. I had no idea that I was taking my boy to say his final goodbyes to my family, but my gut did!

We went on our vacation, everything went well. The following year, Albert was planning to go alone. He was old enough that he could do it, so as we went through borders and airports, I was explaining to him what to do. His idea was to go every year but we couldn’t all go because it was too expensive. On the day that we left Europe, Albert cried so hard when we said goodbye to everyone. I had never seen him cry like that before, I couldn’t make him stop. I kept saying, “You are coming back next year. Before you know it, next year will be here.” But he kept saying, “No mom this is the last time.” Just as my husband couldn’t understand me at the airport, I couldn’t understand him.

We got home safe, and started with our daily routines again. Kids back to school, football season, and back to work. The regular American routine. On the last day of football, Albert came home crying hard again, I said, “Again! What’s wrong? Before you know it, next year will be here again.” and he kept repeating himself, “No mom, this was the last day.” I still couldn’t understand him, even though at one point of time, I was talking like him, I still couldn’t make sense of it.

The Day Our Life Changed

It was about three months before Thanksgiving on one Saturday after breakfast, Robert went to play Nintendo and Albert and I were talking and he says to me, “Mom, what is it that you want from me and Robert?” I said, “For starters you can make me breakfast in bed and wash my dishes. Ha ha ha!” I laughed. He said “No, I’m serious.” “Oh” I said, “You are! Then, nothing. What would I want and why?” He said, “For everything you do for us.” I said, “I’m your mom! Who else will do it?” He said, “No! You are not like all moms; you go out of your way to do things for us!” I said, “You know what I want!”

“I want it so that when you and your brother grow up to be men and when you start telling family stories, and everyone has something to say about their childhood, I want you to say, ‘If I had to do it all over again I would want it to be the same way because I had a mom that left nothing out of my life!’ and I never want you or your brother to see another mom and say, ‘I wish she was my mom.’” He said, “You have done that!” I said, “But I don’t want you to just say that out of respect, I want you to mean it because that is how you truly feel.” He said, “Yes, you have done that!” Then I said, “Well then, I have reached my life’s goal.” At the time I didn’t make anything of this conversation.

The day before Thanksgiving, Albert’s watch stopped, but what was weird (as we call it) was that only the second-hand stopped. The watch was still working. We couldn’t figure out what was going on, in fact the watch is still working today. On November 29, the Monday after Thanksgiving, Albert woke up as usual and I made his breakfast. I was watching the news waiting for him to get ready to go to school, and that’s when it started!

He said, “Mom, I have a headache.” At that moment I felt a stab in my heart and the knot in my stomach that I had felt for 14 years. That is when I knew something was wrong. Albert never got sick. I said you are coming to the hospital with me. He was disturbed about that. He said, “Just give me some Tylenol, why do I have to go to the hospital?” I did just that and he fell asleep. That was my husband’s off day, so I told him to keep an eye on Albert, and you could tell I was in a panicked mood before I left for work. Never in my life have I panicked before; I have always had the strength of God with me.

Around noon I called home to see how he was doing, I didn’t want to call earlier because I was hoping he was just resting and my stomach emotions were wrong, but nobody answered. So I thought he got better and they went out to eat or something. Around 2:30pm, my sister called me and asked who is picking up Robert from school. I said my husband. She said, “No! he is at the hospital with Albert, he wasn’t feeling well.” I said, “What?! Ok, I will go to see what is happening.” thinking they are here, in the hospital that I work at. She said, “No, they are at the medical center.” which is where they take patients with more serious conditions. I told her to pick Robert up and take him to her house until I find out what is going on.

I call at the emergency department at the medical center to find out how Albert is doing. I’m given a nurse on the phone and I ask how Albert’s condition is. She says, “Well, he is breathing right now, but not for long!” I said “What!!!” She says he doesn’t look like he will make it. I couldn’t believe what I had just heard. I hung up the phone and said to my boss, “I have to go home now! Albert isn’t feeling well!” he said, “You don’t look good.” I must have been going pale or something. He said, “Why don’t I drive you?” I said, “No, I need to get there faster.” I was driving at least 60mph on a 25mph-limit road. I don’t even know how I didn’t get stopped by the police or get in an accident.

When I got there, sure enough, here is my dream from 14 years ago, Albert is laying on the hospital bed with the lights directly on him. I’m calling for him but no answer just like in the dream. I ask another nurse, “What is wrong with my boy?” She says, “It doesn’t look good for you.” I was having a hard time believing this so I started yelling, “DOESN’T ANYONE IN HERE KNOW WHAT IS GOING ON? ALL THE DUMB PEOPLE ARE HERE AND NOBODY KNOWS WHAT THEY ARE TALKING ABOUT!” That is when Albert’s doctor, Dr. Walter, came to me. Just by looking at him you would know he is a doctor. He introduced himself as Albert’s

neurologist and said, "If I don't cut Albert open, he will die now! So do you give me the right to do so?"

At that point I knew that this is what is happening. I just froze in disbelief and said, "Yes, go ahead and do what you need to." He started telling everyone to head out to the surgery room. I grabbed his arm and said, "Listen you! You are not going to treat my boy like an average day patient, you will treat him as if he was your son. GOT IT?!" He saw the desperation and panic in my eyes and noticed the fact that I was an employee from there because I still had my work badge on. He started to yell, "Prepare now! We are having the surgery here and now." The nurses responded with confusion, "Here?" "Yes! Here and now!" They told me I had to get out and I did. With terrible disbelief I felt like I was stuck in that dream I had 14 years ago but I can't wake up from it this time.

I got out of the room, by now my family was here and asking how Albert was doing. I was still in disbelief and said, "We all need to sit down and pray or Albert will die." That is truly too much for the human mind to take in that fast, only the power of God keeps you sane. I said our only hope is God. We all sat down joined hands and prayed and less than a half hour later, Albert's doctor walked in and said, "It's good! All the blood is coming out." This is when he explained that Albert had an aneurism and that his head is full of blood. We are not sure of the results yet. "It will take some time before we know if all the blood will flow out. The blood is flowing very quickly right now but he is still in a coma, and we don't know how much, if any, damage to his brain is done at this time." He was such a good man, not just a doctor with a degree but one with a heart.

They transferred him over to the intensive care unit and we were waiting in the lounge for them to stabilize him. A doctor came into the lounge. For the sake of peace, I won't say his name, he was the general doctor, and was dressed like he was at his son's wedding, walking around like he owned the joint. I asked if we can go and see him now. He said, "Yes, but I don't know what you are expecting to see. Your 16-year-old is not the same 16-year-old you had a day ago. He will have to live in a nursing home of some kind." I said, "What?!" He said, "Oh well, shit happens!" He says, "Albert will never be the same again. You have seen the last of that version of Albert." Oh my God! I didn't know whether to cry or smack him across the face. God helped me to make the right decision by not hitting him. I said, "You don't even know my son you scum, and you call yourself a doctor?! Get the hell out of my face before I smack you one. Jerk!"

My husband arrived and I went home for a little bit to take care of Robert. That is when I noticed what had happened at home after I had left to go to work that day. Before Albert had fallen asleep, he had coughed really loudly. That is when his aneurism burst because the wall across from where he was sleeping was splashed with blood. My husband was saying that when he coughed he asked if Albert was okay and if he needed some juice or something, but he wasn't responding. He had slipped into a coma. So that is when my husband had called 911 and went to the hospital. I took care of Robert. He was going to stay at his best friend's house until further arrangements could be made. I went back to the hospital and stayed by Albert's side, not leaving at all.

The next day, Tuesday at 10am, Albert opened his eyes. He couldn't figure out why he was in the hospital. He couldn't remember anything that happened after I had told him to go to the hospital with me. He just assumed I took him there anyway. He had tubes going in his mouth and down his throat, so he couldn't talk much. He was signing me to take them out.

At that time our family doctor, Paul, walked in. He wasn't just our doctor, he was a good friend, the boys grew up with him. Albert got a happy look on him, he tells our doctor, "Take the tubes out! I'm fine, don't listen to my mom, she is overexaggerating." That is when Paul told him, "You are very sick and it's not because your mom thinks so. You are!" He was in huge disbelief, he put his arms up to show his muscles, "See? There is nothing wrong with me." That is when our doctor explained everything about his condition to him. He understood that and started to ask questions. Dr. Walters began to tell him that this is a miracle that you are able to speak and remember everything of your life when in fact your brain is full of blood. His next question was, "Will I play football again?" He still didn't believe he was that sick. The doctor answered him, "Maybe, we will have to wait and see."

I was so caught up in this nightmare that I hadn't showered in days. I hadn't even brushed my teeth. I would never eat or drink anything without brushing my teeth, but during this time I didn't even think of it until the nurses brought it to my attention. Lord only knows how badly I smelled. They gave me stuff to shower and brush my teeth with and they promised to watch Albert while I was in the shower. They also put a foldup bed in his room so I could maybe get some sleep because all I did was sit in the chair to the left of him because all the connecting tubes were on his right. All day I just prayed and ask all kind of questions and they were so patient with me, saying, "You can ask whatever you like as many times as you like." They were good people.

The doctors and nurses were monitoring him all day. Each day the fluid that was draining out became more and more clear. He began to eat and visit and tell jokes like he used to. He became his usual self again. The nurses would come every hour to do their routine check on him by asking him what day it is, where he was, who our president was and so on. He got so tired of that that he asked the nurse, Jennifer, if she could stop doing it. She said, "Ok, the next time I come in, if you remember my name, I will not ask you anymore for the rest of the day." So he wrote her name on his hand and the next time she came in, he was reading her name off his hand and said, "You see how good I am? I remembered, so now leave me be."

She also came to give him a sponge bath. he said, "No, I don't want anyone to bath me except my mom, can she do it please?" He made me promise that I would not let anyone bathe him, that, if need be, I will be the only one to do so. I made the promise and bathed him. He also asked if I could help him shave. He said, "I want to be all clean." So, I did.

The whole time I still had knots in my stomach. Deep down I felt something bad was coming even though things were looking good. About 20 days had gone by. The doctors said that it was looking good, but we'd have to wait for the fluid to fully clear before they could operate. Each day we were getting closer to the operation.

We had hundreds of visitors each day. In fact, the hospital staff was so good and understanding to our situation, that they set up a special conference room for all of our visitors with coffee and sometimes food. They even gave me a hospital pager for all the phone calls we would get. We have family and lots of friends all over the world. For as many visitors that came, we had even more phone calls, mail, cards and letters from all over the world.

The students and faculty from the school had made a huge banner with everyone's name and their own personal comments. I would read them every night to him. He couldn't believe all the wonderful comments. He would say, "They are saying that about me?" I would say, "Yes, you are

loved by many.” It’s like our community became my family and somehow, I knew they all had my back even when I felt so alone.

I stayed at the hospital the whole time. I was afraid to leave because I felt that that is when something would happen and I would never forgive myself. No one had a problem with that except for the general doctor and his wife. Every day they walked around like they were in a fashion show. The general doctor said that I make him nervous, to which I said, “If you know your job, I shouldn’t make you nervous. If anyone should be nervous, it should be all the nurses that I’m in the way of all day, but yet they are doing everything possible to make it comfortable for me.” I stepped out of the room when he came to put his general lines through and I came back in when he was done. He came back and said, “I have to do that all over again.” I said, “You are funny!” He said, “No, I really have to do them again.” That is when I got really mad and said, “Why did you do them wrong! I was not here to make you nervous and does my insurance know that you are going to charge them double because you don’t know how to do your job?” I left the room and went to Dr. Walter and I told him, “I want you to take him off Albert’s care. He should no longer treat Albert!” and I told him why. He removed him from Albert’s care. The next morning, he came in to check on Albert and I said, “Get out! Albert is no longer your patient.” He replied, “Who said that?” I said, “I did! You are not a doctor; you are a butcher and belong in a meat house.” Removing him from Albert’s care created less drama for me because I already had more than I could handle. The world will be cruel to you on your weakest day, don’t be surprised.

As for Robert, he was staying at his best friend’s house, the best people you would ever meet in the world. He was not comfortable anywhere else. Since they had been friends for a very long time and had the same class together, it made more sense that he stayed there. He would be busy playing all day, and it would help keep his mind off his brother. Their family didn’t stay home one day. They went to the zoo, museum, library, so many other places I can’t even remember. They took better care of him than if he would have been home with us. They would go to school together with his friend and my husband would pick him up from school each day to spend some time with him or bring him to the hospital. At times he felt like coming to visit, other times he couldn’t stand to see his brother like that.

It was Wednesday, the 15th of December, his surgery was scheduled for Thursday. My husband picked up Robert from school and on that day he decided that he wanted to buy dinner with his money from Burger King to have dinner with his brother. That was the last supper Albert had. After supper, my husband took Robert back to his friend’s house. During that time Albert was visited by both of his best friends and they stayed way past visiting hours. They laughed, told stories, and said goodbye not knowing that that would be their final night together.

On Thursday morning his aneurism burst again. Doctors said, “It’s ok, we will just postpone the surgery. He is as strong as an ox he will be fine.” So all the tubes went back in his mouth and he couldn’t talk or eat anymore. He slept most of the day. Jennifer worked that day because the night shift girl had called-in and she volunteered to work the night shift also. She really cared for Albert and she wanted everything to be done right.

On Friday morning, the 17th, I was watching him sleep. He woke up and I asked him how he slept. He shook his hand indicating ‘so-so’ and was pointing to the tubes to take them off. He hated having them in. I said, “As soon as the doctor comes today, I will have him remove them.” Both nurses were reviewing everything and Jennifer was about to leave after working two shifts in a row as the first shift was taking over. Then he looked deep into my eyes, I said, “What sweetie?”

and he kept looking and then his eyes rolled into the back of his head. I started screaming, “WHAT IS HAPPENING?!” Nobody knew what was going on. The nurses were checking everything but nothing made sense. They prepared him for an x-ray and as they left with him, I fell to the ground, I just knew this was it. The bad feeling that I had in my stomach for years, it was the darkest day of my life and I’m on the floor alone. Jennifer came back to comfort me. I said, “No! Go with him and make sure everything is ok. Find out what is wrong. I have God with me.” Even though I couldn’t understand what or why God is doing this. I must have passed out somewhere after that because I couldn’t remember when they brought Albert back. I woke up on the couch in the lounge. When I went to the room he was sleeping. Jennifer was still here and said the doctor wanted to talk with me.

We went to the lounge and Dr. Walters came in and said, “It was his aneurism, it went off again.” and now he was gently trying to tell me that he is brain dead. I started yelling, “Don’t tell me that!” In my head, I knew it was so, but emotionally my body was not accepting it. I said, “No, that’s not true because you all told me that he was going to die in the emergency room but he lived so much longer. So, you go and put another tube in his head so the blood can come out faster.” He tried to convince me but I wouldn’t take no for an answer. He went to put another tube in his head so the blood could come out faster. I was told later that during that time the doctor had seen Jennifer’s name on Albert’s hand and he asked he asked her why. She had told him, he then walked out and started to cry.

Once I got myself together, I went to see him. He was sleeping, his left eye was just a tad open. I had seen the other tube and the blood was not moving anymore. In my head I knew the doctor was right. My heart and emotions were not taking it in. I sat down in the chair next to Albert, I started talking to him. He started gasping for his last breath. I started screaming, “No Albert! Don’t let go, don’t you dare leave me!” He stopped and then he closed his left eye. I looked at the time it was 11:45am, on Friday. As Muslims, Friday is our holy day. It was also the midst of Ramadan, the holiest time of year.

At that point I knew that this was God’s will and there was nothing the doctors or myself could do to reverse this. I have always said and meant it, that God does all things for a good reason and that we will benefit from it. Why is this a good reason? I don’t know, but I do believe that when I stand before God and ask him, he will have a good reason that will make sense. I do believe that God does not want to see us hurting, even if it may seem that way at times. Though I also know that we have to physically and mentally experience challenges that make us become stronger, wiser, and fearless so that we can turn all our obstacles into stepping stones and rise higher.

We wanted to keep him on life support for 24 hours. We were hoping for a miracle. I kept saying to myself that God will not do this to me, I have been a good little girl all my life, he wouldn’t hurt me this way. We waited through all of Saturday, but nothing happened. We waited until noon on Sunday, still nothing. Dr. Walters said, “We have to take the life support off because it was doing a lot of damage to his body.” So, we had to put him to rest. I had to be there when it happened because he had no living will and he is technically not an adult. As I’m walking to the room I start thinking, “I’m going to put my son to death.” It was more than my mind could bear, so my legs gave up on me and I fell to ground. My cousin picks me up as they bring a wheel chair to take me to the room so I can give the final word to ‘pull the plug.’

The doctors asked if we were willing to donate, but I said, “It’s not up to me, he already made that decision.” It was in August that we went to get his driver’s license. I filled out the application and

when that question came around, I asked him because I didn't feel like it was my decision. He said no. As I keep saying, deep down our gut knows; and God helps prepare us to make the decisions that we will need answers to later.

They took care of everything and we left the hospital. That whole time, not once did it cross my mind that I will leave there without him. All I could think of is, this is a cruel joke that someone is playing because I know it's not real. I went to get my car where I had left it 20 days ago in the emergency parking lot. It had a ticket on it because it wasn't supposed to be there for that long.

I had never felt so lost with nowhere to go, although I did know where to go. I had to go and tell Robert the news. I have no idea how you tell a 10-year-old that your brother has passed on... two days before his birthday; when his only wish was that Albert will be home for his birthday.

We went and picked Robert up from his friend's place and the first thing he asked was, "Is Albert home?" I didn't even answer until we got home. I sat him down in his bedroom and I'm lost for words. I tell him, "You know how there are angels in heaven?" He said "Yes." I said, "Well now Albert is one." He said, "Ok, when is he coming home from there?" I said, "You know how grandpa has gone to heaven?" He said, "Yes." I said, "Well, Albert is in the same place." He said, "Ok, but when is he coming home?" I said, "Well, grandpa didn't come home." He said, "I know, but when is Albert coming home." Then I just came out and said it... "Well, Albert is dead!" He started screaming and I could not stop him. He cried himself to sleep, in my arms. That was the longest, darkest day of my life. I slept beside him in his youth bed that night and for a whole year.

I kept telling him, "It's ok, he is in a better place now. He lives in peace." That also meant that I needed to look the part, that I was playing, not crying, because we are glad he is in peace. Even at the funeral and during the burial, with the grace of God, I held up strong with him constantly looking into my eyes to see if it's still ok because everyone else is crying. My tears were still coming down like rain but my voice was silent. We had over 1000 people, the entire school was there.

At the funeral, this young man approached me. He was a student at the high school. He had a very different upbringing from Albert. He had a great deal of drawings and piercings on his body. He said to me, "Are you Albert's mom?" I said, "Yes." He said, "You should really be proud of him. I know you are probably wondering what I have to do with your son, but I have a story to tell. Each day we would cross in the hall at the same time and he always said 'good morning' and gave me a half a smile. At first, I didn't respond to him for couple of months but he still kept doing it. One day I asked him, 'Why do you keep acknowledging me?'" He said, "Why not?" I told him, "...because you are such a clean-cut jock and I am the opposite!" He said, "We are both human, right?" He finished, "Now that he has been gone from school for over a month, I realize what a difference he made in my day, I miss him. Thank you!"

The funeral director said to us, "You should not cry but feel proud. In my forty years of working here, I have never seen this many people." They had to open all the rooms and basement and there were still people outside.

The people that lived next to the cemetery had called the office to see if the mayor had died because there were so many cars that people had parked in front of their homes and walked to the cemetery even though it was one of the coldest days of the year. I was holding up until they started rolling him in the grave and that is when I started to scream, "No Albert! Don't go!" Robert squeezed my

hand and said, “Mom, you said it’s ok, right?” I replied, “You are right! He is better now.” Although I believe that I was the one dying and I felt like they put the wrong person in there. It should have been me. At the same time, I kept remembering that I have this little hand that’s holding on to me and he has this pain that’s greater than he can handle. With that in my thoughts we went home and left Albert there. Even though this whole thing took place for about a little over a month, everything was so confusing and fast that it felt like one long, dark day in a nightmare that I couldn’t wake up from.

Albert

Being the kind of person Albert was, his friends, coaches, teachers and students created a game in his honor that they called the “Powder Puff”. It’s where the girls play (flag) football and the guys are the coaches and cheerleaders.

Albert’s student friends, which I will refer to as “the boys,” were a group of kids, both boys and girls, that came together from all different schools and became friends. Most of the time they were in the same sports, classes, and hangouts which was usually our house. They were as I called them, “The Best Apples of the Tree,” it was a pleasure to have them over.

The principal of the school at the time was a great leader and was touched deeply by the situation. He had been at a Milwaukee Bucks game and told them our story. He got four front row tickets to a game, a signed Ray Allen jersey, and a basketball signed by all the players. He gave them to me and I said, “What should I do with this?” He said, “It’s for you.” We decided to raffle them off at the Powder Puff game. We made \$3000, I was amazed, and so we started a scholarship in his honor and that was just the beginning.

The yearly blood drive that the school did was also dedicated to him. The blood center called our family to tell us that it was the greatest turnout that they ever had. Adding to that, we gained a voice in the media. We were admired by our community neighbors for creating such a bond between people that may otherwise have been strangers and have now become family.

All the football games were dedicated to him. All the helmets had the number 33 on them, the number of his jersey, which they later retired. The school also changed the t-shirt logo for that year, instead of the usual “Rockets,” the logo instead read as “Rock33ts” and on the back it said “Angel in the End Zone” and it had the number 33 with a halo on it.

Everywhere we went, people just wanted to hear the story. They planted a tree that a nursery had donated in his honor. It seemed as though each time his name was mentioned, there were crowds of people. It wasn’t just people, but also a large amount of funds was donated to our family.

We wanted to use the funds to represent him in the image that he was, combined with giving something back to everyone that helped us get through this. I also understood that God had a message that he wanted all of us to learn from this, I just hadn’t figured it out yet. The scholarship was created and the school had made some improvements that Albert wanted to see while he was still around. The scholarship fund was combined with the game. Our mantra was “Plow Through Your Storm.”

Many years later it has become much more than that. It's a lesson learned that if we as people can come together and overcome such a tragedy and get a positive outcome out of it, then you as an individual can overcome any obstacle and bring your dreams to pass. It's not what life gives you, it's how you will handle it that will dictate your future.

South Milwaukee may be a small city, but it has a big heart and a loud voice. Thank God for the love and care of friends, family, teachers, coaches, students and our community that we claimed victory from our loss. Still today, people are happy to donate, to volunteer and enjoy the game. Everyone has fun. Some students can also claim victory by receiving the scholarship. It's all made possible by the volunteers and donations. We have given over 80 scholarships and are still standing strong. We are always grateful to give back some of the light that came through in our darkness.

The Aftermath

Everyone thinks the funeral is the most difficult time during a death, so everyone tries hard to make it there, but when everyone leaves, only you get to stay! Whether you believe in God or not, when your personal life throws you in the maze, the professional life you had before still must go on. To the world, you are just the next person in line.

My son Robert, who is my only child now, still must go to school because I do want him to have a normal life, if that's even possible. I have to go to work, face the world, and pay my bills. It's not the same out there. It's like I was dropped in a jungle and everywhere I go there are predators ready to attack me, because everything I do, I feel pain that does not go away. Even when people are nice, my pain overpowers their kindness. In my thoughts I ask, "Did the sun disappear? Why is it only dark? Clearly my God has abandoned me, the only source that always got me through life. Is this the end of my relationship with God? Why?!"

Throughout the day my soul would grieve in anguish and torment wondering why I'm still here with no purpose. I shouldn't be alive, and of course suicide is dancing in my head. That has become an option I would have never considered before. Still, putting a face on and a positive demeanor would please the world, and not just the world, but most importantly my son, Robert.

When he falls asleep, all the demons of Hell come loose. Not just from the exhaustion of my body or from the tears flowing all day like a broken faucet. The pain in my body is like something is chewing the flesh off my bones. Worst of all, my thoughts are my greatest enemy! It's the battlefield of the mind. The torment of replaying all the painful memories and the negative thoughts that I'm desperately trying to let heal in order to get some kind of peace of mind. Instead, it repeats over and over scrapping from one wound to another.

I see a battle of my own mind and flesh against my spirit and soul, trying to tell me, "You are finished, just give up, take your life and be done." It goes on to say, "You deserve this, that is why God abandoned you. He hates you now and that's why bad things are happening now and forever." These thoughts rattle my organs. I can feel my blood pressure rising and an anxiety attack comes upon me not allowing me to breathe.

The spirit of God in me, my creator, is saying, "It's not your time. Get up and take care of Robert and fulfill your responsibilities. I built you and gave you life, and only *I* take it from you. I expect

you to win (Even Death Shouldn't Stop Your Race)! Giving up was never an option why are you allowing it to be one now?!"

The torment has exhausted me to the point where I have passed out on the kitchen floor, only to wake up two hours later from the cold floor and a freezing body just to begin the day and do it all over again and again.

In order for me to be able to work I had to go to the doctor every week for two months to get a depression examination. He diagnosed me with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) which was the cause of all my physical and mental pain. He told me that I should go on medication to ease all the pain. I refused, because if I took the medication now to ease the pain, then, when I try to get off the medication, I will have to go through it all again *or* I must imprison myself to medication all my life. I will take the pain now and be done with it even if it kills me.

They say time heals all wounds. That's not true! If you go to the gym everyday and lift weights your muscles will grow and get bigger with time. You'll get stronger and have the ability to lift heavier things more so than before. The same is true for perseverance through hardship, your endurance and patience 'muscles' will mature, stretch, and harden, giving you the ability to withstand all the attacks of the new storms.

I have made Robert my priority, to be there for him no matter what because of my love and responsibility for him. I had to put my feelings on hold. I was worried that he would slip into depression and someday try to take his own life or use some kind of substance to ease his pain and become imprisoned by that. He is way too young for all this pain. He also really has no idea what is going on. I know this because I am an adult and God is my anchor and I am still having such a hard time understanding what just happened. I'm happy when I'm with him, he's the only reason I can breathe and the real joy of my life.

I could see that his pain was so much larger and greater than him. It's like he had developed tunnel vision. He focused only on video games which took him away from his real surroundings. He wouldn't talk much and each day it became less and less. In fact, he started answering by nodding his head rather than using words. I could see him fading more and more from reality each day, hiding the pain with the escape of video games and building walls around himself.

We developed this rule in the family like when a scientist has a great idea and a lightbulb goes on. We will called it an 'Albert lightbulb' and whoever had one has to say that they have an Albert lightbulb, signifying that they were thinking about Albert. If they want to talk about it, we will and if they want be quiet, we will let them be. This way we had an idea of what was going on in the mind.

His school at the time was very helpful. They tried to convince him to see a counselor, but he refused. He said, "My mom will be my counselor." That's like putting an intoxicated binge drinker to teach you how to drive. His mom, me, was a bigger mess than he was. I teamed up with his principle and his teacher. They were great people! Each day we talked and compared notes from the night before with the events of the day. They loved him and cared for him as if he was their own. He also became so comfortable with them that even at school he felt loved like at home.

If I haven't already said it, I will now: When you are going through a storm, be aware of the tsunami right behind it.

It wasn't even four months after Albert's passing. Just when Robert was putting some color in his grey world, the teacher that he had grown to love and be best friends with is diagnosed with brain cancer and within a month she dies. We are at the school field, releasing balloons in the air as a memorial to her. He tells me, "Please buy extra balloons, I want to make a special bunch, just like she was." So I did and when all the balloons went loose he turns to me and says, "Mom, is that how all the people I love are going to die, from a brain attack, is that how you are going to die?" "Nooo!" I say, but how can I even promise anything when I didn't bring his brother home. Was he to believe me? I think not!

Robert's Victory

Robert plowed through all his storms. He stayed active in sports all-year round from middle and high school, but he mostly focused on his academics. In his senior year at high school, in addition to all the sporting events, he was part of a CISCO curriculum at MATC plus was taking Calculus 3 at MSOE. He graduated with high honors and was also part of the National Honors Society. He went on to college at MSOE and got his engineering degree and has been at his job for over ten years now.

At his best friend's wedding, he was the best man and gave quite a speech that had everyone laughing. Even death didn't stop his race!

The First Year

After Albert was gone, 'the boys' were not only hurting but felt sort of lost at the same time because Albert's place was where they hung out and now, they didn't know where to go. I felt the need to help. They were hurting because they loved my son so I was going to do anything on my end to bring some kind of healing in their new journey. They were over a lot, and I said, "This is still Albert's house and if you find comfort here, then stay here." I didn't realize that as I was trying to help them heal, at the same time they were helping me heal. We laughed together, cried together, we talked and sometimes just stayed silent, not even aware we were healing together.

The year after was a real hard one because you go through all the firsts and are completely clueless in how to handle anything. His first birthday for instance, without him how do you celebrate a birthday without that person? Guess who shows up? The boys, they said we all need to be together today. I said, "You're right!" I know he is here too and he will give us some kind of a sign.

The night of his birthday, I made just a regular cake and put it in the oven. The cake blew a big bubble on one side of the pan and enough batter for one cupcake popped out and fell on the floor of the oven, and it burned into a mini cake, there was smoke galore. The rest of the cake turned out normal, that is when we said "Boy, that was weird!" We all watched this happen in disbelief and if they hadn't seen me baking for thirty years they would have thought, "She has never been in a kitchen and she has no idea what she is doing!" In my entire career, nothing like that has ever happened to me.

There are so many firsts. Mother's Day is a hard one for any mom, so on that day I said, "I will beat this by working." I decided to steam-clean my carpets as I felt that was a big chore and it will take me all day and then I will be too tired to think about anything so I will sleep like a baby and I did just that! My husband and my son took me out to eat, and on the way home I was thinking, "I will go to sleep now and I beat another day." When we got home, all my other angels were waiting for me, "You didn't think we forget about our mom on Mother s Day did you?" they said.

For my birthday, I was working at the restaurant. I didn't say anything to anyone, hoping everyone forgot so this too will pass. We got home and ate, my husband said we should go for a walk by the park. I thought that was a good idea because then I will go to sleep and this too will be over. When we got home, they had a surprise party, all decorated and everything. They had talked to Robert and had his key and it wasn't just the boys this time, the moms were here also.

Overtime, we didn't see the boys for a while. My husband said, "The boys haven't come lately." I said, "That's ok." He said, "But you love them." I said, "True but this means they are healing, which is good." It was about a month later, the doorbell rings, and it's the boys! It was the first day of football practice and Albert wasn't there, so we all got together again.

The hardest of all was Robert's birthday. Being so close to Albert's anniversary, my husband and I really tried to make it special. We told everyone to come, we figured the more people that came the less likely he is to think about Albert. The angels came back to the rescue, the boys had bought him a basketball hoop game. It was like having the whole basketball court in the living room. In addition to that, he got so many gifts that he did not have time to open and play with all of them. We had not seen him laugh all year no matter what we did.

The Boys' Victory

These boys, each one of them after all their torment, graduated college, got married, and now have families of their own. They own their homes, all have successful jobs, but most of all they have united in friendship that now they consider each other as brothers, a forever lasting gift. I don't want to take away from their achievements, so I will let their stories speak for themselves.

Not Alone Anymore

As some time has passed on, reality is becoming more vivid. That not only Albert has died, but also my God has left me. What did I do that was so horrible to deserve this? My hope for a better

tomorrow always came from God. He always came through. The answer was not always yes, but he came through with an alternative and guidance.

Now my life is in the maze with no way out. I am trying to figure out how to get through and win especially for Robert in this new normal. Just because we don't see things happening, it doesn't mean its not happening. As I'm adjusting to my new journey alone, trying to stand strong for Robert, that's when God shows up, and when he shows up you know its him!

It is customary for Albanian-Muslims that during the first year of a death, the immediate family hosts several events that we'll call a 'blessing of the soul' (there isn't a direct translation to this). It's when our minister comes to the house to bless the deceased's soul. You cook a seven-course meal and do a prayer with the minister for the deceased.

It's six months after Albert has passed. It's a hot and humid July day and I'm preparing the dinner. We live on the second floor in an old house with a very small air conditioner in the window that helps almost nothing, especially with all the cooking that's going on.

My sister and nephew come and say it's hotter inside than outside. I open the windows to get some air flowing but that's not working either. There is no wind, it's just sticky and humid. I start to cry and I'm calling to Albert saying that this dinner will be a disgrace, who will eat hot food in this hot weather. Adding to that, "My God, why have you abandoned me?"

We go downstairs to bring chairs to set up the tables. As we are coming back up, my nephew, who is very strong, is in front of me with a chair and as we make it to the top of the stairs, he starts walking backwards. I yell, "Dude, you're pushing me down the stairs!" He says, "Aunty, it's the wind!" I reply, "What wind? There is nothing!" He says, "It's very strong." "What?!" I replied. We get to the second floor and the wind that is coming from the windows is so strong and cold things are flying off the walls. We had to close everything and afterwards the house became so cozy. All our guests were dressed for hot summer and when they came, they were freezing, but everybody ate the food and the dinner turned out as a great success. We can call it weird or just a coincidence, but I know he showed up.

Since Albert has passed, I have made it a priority to visit him at the cemetery every day to tell him I love him. After 23 years I have still never missed a day. I mourn in silence.

It was the day after another one of the soul blessing dinners. This time we had the dinner at our mosque, about 300 people showed up. The next day my morning was filled with company. People from out of town had come for the dinner. It was late in the afternoon and I said that I had to go visit Albert before it got too late. My cousin from Detroit said that she wanted to come as well. So we went, the sun is almost setting.

I did a prayer for him and I said, "I hope that last night's prayer dinner counted." As soon as I finished my sentence, the entire grave lit up like a switch went on. I'm looking around to see some lighting, but there is no one around, just us. I thought to myself, this is the reason why my doctor has been keeping an eye on me. Tomorrow I am going to the doctor, but first let me ask my cousin, "Cuz, did you see that?" I was prepared that if she said no, I would say that I saw a bunny or something and would most definitely check myself into rehab. When I asked her, she replied, "Yes! I did see it!" I still asked, "What?" She said the grave lit up. If I was alone when that happened, I wouldn't have ever believed it.

Just when I'm about to question and doubt some of the current reality. One night I had a dream. I'm walking in a long hallway. I keep opening doors and went up seven flights of stairs. The last door is a white door, I open it and on the other side there is a huge white house. The grass and flowers look they are velvet, there is a roaring river of water that looks like crystals and Albert is standing in the middle and says, "See mom? This is where I am."

I woke up and I thought, "Well, I had that dream because that is what I think about all day and my subconscious just made a story for me." I didn't tell anybody or make anything of it, I just went to work. One of my coworkers is my best friend, we have worked together for over 20 years. She says, "I have to talk to you." I said, "Sure what's going on?"

She said, "I had a dream last night. You took me down a long hallway, up the stairs seven times and you opened a white door." At this point I'm balling as I'm listening to her tell me my entire dream. I believe God showed up to let me know Albert is in peace, as he had always guided me before.

It was almost a year after Albert has passed, just before Thanksgiving when it all started. One night I am making a cake for a catering that I had to do for the next morning. I'm short a kiwi so I run to the store. I pass by the long freezer where the turkeys are kept. Any other time I would have just bought the turkey right there, but not this time. I stopped at the edge of the freezer and made every excuse not to buy the turkey because I am not celebrating Thanksgiving. I've been a 'good girl' all my life, cooking and cleaning for everyone and all this happens to me?

However, I am not leaving either, it is like something is holding me there. I am battling my thoughts again with excuses. A woman with a boy in her cart pass by me about four feet away. The boy says something and the mom says, "I cannot understand what you are saying." He says it again. She says, "I can't understand, what are you saying?" He says, "I am not talking to you, I'm talking to Albert." and he points to me. She looks at me and asks again, "Who are you talking to?" He says, "Albert!" and points at me again. I believe he could see my angel trying to tell me not to give up. I bought the turkey and made Thanksgiving dinner.

My Victory

One year after Albert passed away, I built a new home to get a new environment. Throughout the years, I was able start a successful cleaning business. I had a catering business and served the U.S. Marine & Navy Reserves. I started college at the age of 45 and got my associate's degree, baking diploma, and manager's certificate while working full time. I was also promoted to executive chef at Aurora St. Luke's South Shore.

My greatest victory of all is what was left of my family in the valley of death, we rose through the ashes and we now live in joy, not mourning, but spreading the light that came through in our darkness. Robert has grown up to be a great man living with honesty, integrity, and hard work, a great role model of strength.

Conclusion

My purpose and hope is to inspire you, the reader, to take your opposition and embrace it, giving up should not be an option. It takes strength to be courageous. You are the CEO of yourself, your life. Your life will be as good as you make. Your mind can be your greatest enemy or your most reliable ally. You will become what you allow your mind to take control of, excuses or courage.

You don't need a strong family or special people in your life to overcome your trials. You'll notice that it was the people that were otherwise strangers to me that shed light in my darkest times. They became my family. You need to keep thinking positive, be around positive people, be active, be a learner. Knowledge is the greatest gift you can give yourself. Negative spirits are transferable, be careful with who you hang around with.

It's a fact that half of the birds in New Zealand can't fly because there are no predators, like snakes, to oppose them so they have lost the ability to fly even though they were created to fly. Without opposition, the birds lost their own natural abilities. Opposition spurs growth.

Are you allowing your natural abilities to vanish because of the fear of opposition?

"Your every day deposits become your life's savings." What are you depositing in *you* every day?