

Good Evening,

It is an honor to stand before you. I would like to thank Lou Cappelli, Dominic Vesper, Ann Biondi and all of the Camden County Addiction Awareness Task Force for creating space and safety to openly discuss the addiction epidemic, for holding this vigil and for selecting me as a worthy messenger, as I know these words will be heard among many.

I am no one special. I live an average life. I come from a hard-working, middle-class family. I am one of six siblings. My parents, George and Carol Bakey, have taught their children the meaning of family, loyalty, and work ethic. Outside looking in, my family could uphold an appearance that might classify us however people see fit. People joked that we were the Brady Bunch. I'm not sure TV would have aired all of the Bakey Bunch's episodes. The truth is we are no different from any other family. We have loved, battled, stood humbly in our wins, and struggled with our losses. We were not exempt for what life had in store for us. You see, the wealth in my life does not come from money or possessions; it is an abundance of love and support from these people closest to me. I think this is why the pain we feel today and everyday is so excruciating; we have lost someone of value. We have lost someone who advanced our lives; someone who took it from average and made it extraordinary. The richest we have felt was in his/her presence, spending the daily ups and downs of life with someone we love so fiercely.

My sister, Jackie, was beautiful. So much so that it created a sibling/annoyance bond. Sometimes, just to shake her up a little (as a good sister does), I would stand next to her in our laundry room mirror on my ugliest appearance days (you know the days you won't even step outside), put my arm around her and say, "people are right, we really do look alike," and watch her panic for a few seconds. The truth is I could never touch her kind of beauty. It mostly came

from her overall innocence, intelligence, and respect for her own self. She knew her worth and stood for what was right; an example most women should have. I wish it didn't take me as long as it did to understand her life's message. Jackie, I do now, and I thank you.

I don't need to tell you that despite Jackie's brightest days, she also battled the darkest ones. Depression got the best of her, as well as its right-hand man, addiction. I'm not sure any of my family members saw this coming. Jackie was our straight-A student and our straight-laced sibling. She was quick to call us out on our wrong-doings and quick to remove herself from any situation that didn't fit her standards. After a serious car accident, a misdiagnosed injury, and prescribed pain-killers, the Jackie we knew, just didn't function the same. As a roommate, I begged and bribed Jackie to conquer the darkness. I fought a hard fight, but as you might know, I wasn't fighting Jackie, I was fighting her demons in hopes she would find some fight, too. On February 13, 2007, I found Jackie on our bathroom floor. I watched her suffer in pain and heard what I didn't know would be her last thoughts: apologies and fear. Within 24 hours, my family and I stood by her in her final moments. On February 14, 2007, we lost Jackie, at the young age of twenty-five.

I was nineteen years old when Jackie passed. At nineteen I learned pain. I learned shock. I learned anger, sadness, fear, and regret. I learned how to stand. Basic motions and emotions had to be revisited, felt, and conquered.

I am not here to tell you of some rising-up story. I am not here to glorify grief or to make light of anyone's pain. Instead, I am here to acknowledge you and your hurt. Your world has been forever altered, as if spinning on a different axis now, while the rest of the world carries on. I am here to let you know that healing in its truest form isn't glamorous, but it is possible, and it is worth it. There is light, and as overwhelming or cliché as it might sound, it's within you.

Over the first handful of years in Jackie's absence, I was simply surviving, powering through life, head down, getting to my next destination. Some days, the next best move was all I could make, and it was the right choice in order to get by. Honestly, you'll be amazed at how you performed daily activities in times of grief. I wish I could give you a nice visual of a staircase, to show you the progression of healing, but the realistic view wouldn't show you proper climbing nor a smooth process. It would look more like simple movements or steep climbs among broken, splintered, and missing steps. This one foot in front of the other method didn't hold for long. It was only temporary wound covering.

Several years later, the meltdowns began. Waves of pain, mostly the regret of failing to save someone so close to me, had me searching for peace. I began studying, consuming knowledge on depression, addiction, and psychology. Simple, non-formal education from a book or a phone helped me to understand pieces of Jackie that I couldn't see before. It reconstructed the damage done by addiction and restored the vision of who Jackie really was, before addiction robbed her. This was only half of the process.

Even though her image was renewed, I was still suffering; I was my own worst critic, juggling forgiveness and regret, staring down time, and seeing her face in my dreams. I had healed my memory of her, but I had failed to heal myself. So, the education started again. This time-the focus was on looking inward: asking myself the hard questions, owning up to my own accountability, understanding my pain from loving someone with an addiction, realizing my unhealthy need to save others, recognizing my emotions and reactions, and battling the inability to forgive myself. Let me tell you, this inner work was ugly and it brought me down several avenues, only to bring me back to this:

We have suffered one of the greatest losses. We have experienced unfathomable pain, and yet, here we are, still going, still existing, still managing to balance life while mourning, missing, and aching. Take a moment, look around you. We are connected through loss, through sadness, through empathy, and in moving forward, through healing. It's powerful to be in this crowd and to physically, mentally, and emotionally know the heartache of the strangers standing by us right now. Take another moment. Close your eyes. Visualize your loved one. Remember his/her face. Picture him/her in his/her best form. Acknowledge the longing you have for him/her and the sadness that comes with his/her absence. Open your eyes. Look around again. I understand that no two pains are the same, but pain is pain nonetheless, and here we are, as one, knowing how each other one feels.

I am not here to tell you that healing is easy, because it is not. I am not here to tell you healing will not hurt, because it does. I am not here to tell you that you won't miss his/her voice or laugh, because you will. I am here to tell you that when you can, when you are ready to live simply beyond surviving grief, when you are ready to ditch the one foot in front of the other method, look inside yourself. Ask yourself the hard questions. Read the books. Write the feelings. Know what upsets you. Know what you need to bring to the surface. Listen to the stories of others. Begin to forgive. There is a path to healing, and it is up to us to choose it. Once we mend ourselves, we can open the doors of discussion. We can break the stigmas. We can uncover the cover-ups. So, heal the image of the person you lost. Bring them back to the memory they deserve. Then heal yourself. Bring yourself back to the you that you deserve. It does not change the love you have for him/her. You will always miss and mourn his/her absence. That love, that longing, that will never go away, however it will come from a new place; it will come from a place of light that can only be found after your own staircase, your own educating, your

own mending work. So when you feel it is time, climb out of the dark. Your healed life is waiting, and if you ever need reminding of where the light is, look inside.

In honor of Jacqueline Marie Bakey and Matthew Thomas Sweda, and to all of your loved ones taken by addiction, - sons, daughters, brothers, sisters, grandchildren, cousins, husbands, wives, fiances, extended family, and friends- take a moment to say his/ her name out loud now and honor his/her life. We love you. You are never forgotten.

Thank you.