

Still Standing

My Journey from Pain to Purpose

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Dedication



This book is dedicated in loving memory to my precious son,
JOHN LEONARD CALLAN,
a servant leader whose time on earth was cut too short,
but whose legacy and impact will be remembered forever.
The joy and inspiration he shared with others was infectious.
I'll see you in heaven, Sweet Boy.

*“Sometimes,
life is like a glow stick.
You have to be broken
in order to shine.”
-Unknown*

Introduction

People say God won't give us more than we can handle, but sometimes life throws us too many curve balls at one time. Responsibilities, burdens, commitments and tragedies get stacked on top of each other until we fear our whole world may come tumbling down. Where is God in those moments? How do we hang onto hope when we are under the crushing weight of loss, anxiety, and stress?

That is the place I found myself in November 2016 when my seventeen-year-old son, Johnny, was tragically killed in a single car accident on his way to a livestock show. When I was first told about his death, I couldn't – *wouldn't* believe it was true. I fell to the floor screaming, "Why?" and lived for months in a fog, unable to process the smallest of decisions ...

... until I saw my son in a dream and was reassured he is happy in heaven. That is when God interrupted the trajectory of my thoughts and showed me a new way of life filled with hope and gratitude.

How did God help me heal and give me the strength to go on? When, and how, did God intervene and plant a new passion and purpose in me to bless others and honor my son's life? How can you, by faith, come to believe God

wants to do the same for you? What desire does God want to birth in you today?

I hope you will find answers to those questions and more as you read this book. It is the story of my life, my dreams, my heartbreaking losses, and the powerful way God walked with me through it all and led me to a place I never imagined I would be.

The pain of loss never goes away. It takes a toll on the entire family. But I clung to the comfort scripture offers in *Romans 8:28* – “For we know that God works all things together for good for those who love him and are called according to his purpose.” His purposes are so much bigger than we can fathom.

God turns darkness into light. He shines through the smallest flicker of faith and guides us through our grief with a gentle heart of compassion and love. I pray that my story encourages and inspires you to dream beyond your grief. Don't deny your pain and sadness. Give yourself permission to grieve at your own pace while you trust in God's promise of a wonderful plan and purpose for you on the other side.

As I drew closer to God through my grief, I learned to rely more and more on my faith in Jesus and His love for me and my family. After months of mourning, I came to understand that God did not take my son. He received what was His all along and welcomed him to his eternal home.

Proverbs 3:5-6 says, “Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge him, and he shall direct your paths.”

Introduction

May you be richly blessed through my story, and may the God of all hope fill you with peace and joy as you seek Him. God has a wonderful plan for your life. I would love to hear your story as it unfolds.

Much love,

Kerri

One

Learn to Live With Loss

You Are Not Alone

“God blesses those who mourn,
for they will be comforted.”

- Matthew 5:4

It was 5:20 am. Though darkness covered the room, the forecast was calling for another warm sunny day. A perfect day for our long drive home.

Everyone was asleep at my in-law's cozy farmhouse. My husband and I, and two of our children, had driven close to 500 miles from our home in Jacksboro, Texas to Louisiana to spend a few days with his family at Thanksgiving.

My son, Johnny, asked to stay with his grandparents in Texas so he could participate in the Fall Classic in Waco, one of the largest jackpot shows. The fall classic is an event where kids go to compete for awards on various species of animals like goats, pigs, sheep, etc. Johnny had a goat whom he loved. He affectionately named him Ron Burgundy and really enjoyed entering Ron in various goat competitions.

Though his text woke me from a deep sleep, I smiled. I knew it was my son Johnny. He and Ron were leaving early for the show. We had talked the night before, joking and laughing about upcoming holidays and discussing Christ-

mas gift ideas. He promised to drive safely and ended his text with, “I love you.”

Little did I know it would be the last text I would ever receive from him.



My husband, Gus, and I enjoy playing practical jokes on each other. He’s much better at it than I am, but it’s always been a playful part of our relationship. I couldn’t imagine why he would think it would be funny to joke about my son being killed in a car accident. Yet, that’s what I thought when he came into the room as I was preparing to head home with him and the kids.

“Kerri, I don’t know how to tell you this,” he said. I could barely hear his voice as he mumbled the words, his face contorted in a way I’d never seen before. When our eyes met, I knew something was terribly wrong, but never imagined just how traumatic that something would be.

As he continued to speak, my mind went blank. I heard him say, “Johnny was in an accident. He didn’t survive,” but I couldn’t seem to grasp what he was saying. My knees buckled as my body went limp in his arms.

Then I cried and screamed: “Why? Why? Why? What am I supposed to do now?”

My mother-in-law ran up the stairs, took me in her arms and tried to comfort me saying, “I don’t know, but we have the same heart.” She understood only too well what I was feeling because she had lost a son when he was twenty. At that moment, I realized I had become a member of a group I never wanted to be part of.

My daughter, Alexis, heard my screams and ran to find out why I was so upset. When Gus told her, she sobbed in his arms while my mother-in-law continued to hold and comfort me.

Soon after, we packed the truck to go home. It was the longest eight-hour ride of my life. Gus drove fast, like we were in a hurry to get home, but why? Johnny was already gone.

Opening the door to our house, the first thing I saw were my son's shoes. I carried them to his room, laid them next to his bed, and quietly shut the door as though I could erase the painful truth and bring him back to life.

As I walked to the kitchen, family members started to arrive, each one in shock, not knowing what to say. I felt like they were watching my every move, waiting for me to break down in front of them. Several minutes later, I realized the pressure inside of me could no longer be contained. I felt like I was going to burst. So I slipped out the door, sat on the ground and wept.

My mom came outside and held me, followed by my brother. When I told them I felt pressure to entertain the people in my home, they went inside and asked everyone to go to my mother's house to give me some time to grieve. With everyone gone, I finally felt free to climb into bed and just 'be'.

I could cry out to God, stare at the wall, or sleep – whatever I felt I needed to do – without an audience. I wanted to lay there forever, lost in my pain, but Johnny's school had planned a candlelight vigil the next night to honor him, and I knew I needed to be there.

Words were spoken. Songs were shared. But I couldn't tell you what was said or sung. I just sat in the gym in an emotional fog waiting to be escorted out before anyone else was released. I couldn't bear to talk to anyone that night. Yet, in the midst of my pain, I could feel Jesus's presence with me. His comfort laying over me like a warm blanket of calm. His promises leading me slowly toward His peace that passes all understanding.

On the morning of the viewing, I found a box in Johnny's closet and pulled it out to take to the funeral home. It contained letters Johnny had written, awards he had won and items he had made with his own two hands. His favorite song was even included in the collection. It was like he was planning his own funeral.

Though I had been advised not to look at his broken and bruised body before it was prepared for his casket, I knew I had to. I was desperate for closure. I was his mother, and I needed to connect with my son one last time.

As others gasped and cried out seeing my son's body and the trauma he had suffered, I stood silently waiting, preparing my heart for the reality I was about to face. After a few moments, I raised my hand to his and gently touched it. His hand was cold and clammy like it always felt, but there was a stiffness now, an ever-present emptiness. Then I asked everyone to please leave the room so I could have a moment alone with him.

I sat in a chair near the table where he was laying and prayed before I slowly lifted the covers to see what his body had been through. In that moment I felt the pain of his broken bones penetrate my body. My heart broke into a

million pieces. The thought of him suffering was almost more than I could bear.

Making funeral plans with my husband, preacher, parents, and Johnny's biological father was just as heart-wrenching. No one wants to talk about, or even think about, having to plan their child's funeral. As Eugene, our preacher, tried to comfort me in the midst of my pain, the following words sprang from my mouth: "Johnny was never my son to lose. He was God's child. I just had the privilege of raising him."

Eugene stood weeping as he replied, "Most people don't understand that."

I was as astonished as he was when I spoke those poignant words, but now I see that Jesus was speaking through me, through my pain. The Bible says He is acquainted with sorrow, not just any sorrow, *our* sorrow. He feels our pain and bears it with us.



Our family before the accident

It's always more comforting to talk with someone you relate to who you believe knows exactly how you feel and what you are walking through. Jesus is the ultimate comforter. I know that from personal experience, but that didn't change the fact that I had to walk through the grief.

Although I didn't feel like attending the formal viewing, I knew that the people who cared about my son needed to see me there. They needed closure too after all, and an opportunity to express their condolences.

I stood outside for two hours as people waited to hug me and confirm to me how very special my son was. I felt blessed and proud to have raised a son who impacted so many in such meaningful ways. Still in shock, I didn't cry at the viewing, but the tears were ever-present, ready to spill out when I least expected it.

Johnny was young, so the funeral director scoured social media to get an estimate of how many people might attend the funeral in order to be well prepared. The amount of posts was so significant they asked if it would be okay to hold the funeral in the high school gym, advising it was the only place big enough to hold everyone.

As it turned out, they were right. More than 1,500 people were present that day, though I never glanced at their faces. I walked in staring at the floor knowing if I made eye contact with anyone and saw the sadness on their face, I would lose my battle to contain my tears. My husband literally held me up as I walked because my knees were so weak.



Johnny's funeral in the high school gym

While I don't remember the details, I do remember feeling that the funeral was beautiful. A perfect way to memorialize my sweet son.

In the days that followed the accident, I felt like I had to know everything my son went through before he died. I visited the crash site and visualized each tragic moment. Pieces of Johnny's truck were scattered everywhere, along with debit cards and personal items. Shavings from his goat, his goat's collar – even his goat, Ron Burgundy, who also died in the accident.



Johnny with Ron Burgundy

I'll never forget my daughter saying she was glad Ron Burgundy died too. When I asked why, she said because then Ron and Johnny could be together in heaven. I had not thought of it that way, but was deeply touched by my daughter's compassionate comment.

I went to see Johnny's truck and called the highway patrolman who was there to ask him every question I was anxious to know the answer to. A friend of mine called and told me her husband had gone to the scene of the accident and met the man who found Johnny. Apparently, the man walked over to my friend's husband and said he wanted to know about the boy's family. The man's name was John.

Immediately, I wanted to see him. Talk to him. Ask him everything about what he had witnessed that morning. Thankfully, when I phoned, he agreed to meet me and graciously answered many of the questions I had. Some, however, he refused to answer, which made me angry. Only when he shared that he had a son die the same way at the same age did I feel that, perhaps, he was protecting my mother's heart by keeping some answers to himself.

A month later, as my husband and I sat at church on Christmas morning, our preacher began to call people forward for prayer. He started with, "If you need prayer, come forward." Gus and I didn't move, so he said, "If something has happened in your life lately that is unimaginable, come forward and let us pray for you." We remained seated as our preacher became more emphatic with his invitation to prayer.

Finally, I looked at Gus and said, "He's talking to us. If we don't get up, he is fixing to say our names." At that, we stood and walked forward for prayer. In the end what

touched me the most was seeing the entire congregation standing and praying over us when we turned around to return to our seats. It was a powerful confirmation of their incredible love for us and support for our family.

With the accident still fresh in my mind, I continued to struggle for weeks until the night Johnny appeared in a dream. I saw him kneeling down in front of me and, with great enthusiasm, telling me that God is real and heaven is amazing. He also told me that he was lifted above the accident, that he watched the entire crash unfold. And then he was gone.

It was a short, sweet, comforting message that God allowed me to receive in order to help me take another step forward in my healing process.

Grief can cripple you. It makes you feel isolated, alone, damaged, and scared. When people tell you to move on before you're ready to move on, the opposite happens. The pain intensifies and you begin to hide your feelings to avoid other people's comments and concern.

I don't know your story, but I do know that loss is loss. Whether you've lost a dream, a child, a relationship, or anything else significant to you, it hurts. Your pain is valid, and grieving is necessary if you want to be emotionally healthy again.

Please know you are not alone in your pain. God is with you. Even if you're angry with Him, He will never leave you. He is not uncomfortable with your sadness. He will see you through. You will find joy again and be led to a new – or renewed – passion and purpose if you believe in the One who can bring good from every failure, wound and loss.

Still Standing

My story is a testimony of that. I pray you will invite God to do the same for you.