

On The Journey to Healing – A Mother's Journey



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Glenn David Ross was two months shy of his 40th birthday. He was filled with excitement at having just finished his Master’s Degree and looking forward to more freedom, a pay hike, spending more time with his long-standing girlfriend and to receiving the official letter from the university acknowledging his accomplishment. It was the same day of the horrific Haiti earthquake, January 12, 2010, that I lost my son to a rare disease. While his struggle was over, mine was about to begin.

I had read “The Dash” many times. Its true meaning and relevance never had the same impact as it did thinking of my son, Glenn. It’s painful that his dash was cut short. But what he did have is one that added so much value, meaning, love, caring, laughter, and friendship to those whose lives were touched during his time with us.

Glenn led his life with dignity. In spite of an illness that was his constant companion, he never let that interfere with living his life at full throttle. I can remember times, after the fact, that he’d talk about jumping out of an airplane, white water rafting, competitive tennis, soccer, and rock climbing in Jamaica. Knowing I’d try to talk him out of it, I understood why he never told me ahead of time! Glenn let nothing stand in his way when it came to a great time!

As a former educator, when Glenn made the decision to enter the teaching profession, I was thrilled. All of us knew he’d make a great teacher. Unable to have children of his own, he loved kids. He was a joke teller and juggler and his classroom was the perfect setting for his authentic self! During student teaching, Glenn shared a required taping with us and reviewing again recently, I smiled just seeing him in action. I had emailed Glenn that I was not being prejudiced and that even if I wasn’t his mom, I could honestly say his science lesson rocked. As soon as you saw kids clamoring to answer his questions, you recognized his impact on his students.

All parents raise their children to be honest, to care about others, and to contribute who they are to make the world a better place. Glenn was truly a gift to the world. Whatever his dad and I did, even with the inevitable mistakes along the way, Glenn grew up to be an exceptional man. In our lifetime, we all desire to make a difference in the world – to leave it a bit better than before and to know that our life mattered. While Glenn’s dash was cut short, who he was and what he accomplished in his 39+ years had a huge impact. He will forever live on in our hearts and in the lives of those he touched, including his beloved colleagues and students of Hull Middle School in Duluth, Georgia.

In their 2010 yearbook, a special page was included to memorialize Mr. Glenn Ross. With love and pride I share this acknowledgement.

*Gone from our school that smiling face, the cheerful happy ways.
The heart that won so many friends, in bygone happy days.
Lonely is your class without you, science to them is not the same.
All the school would be like Heaven, if we could have you back again.
We miss him and mourn him in sorrow unseen.
And dwell on the memory of days that have been.*

Dates have a way of reminding us of joys experienced and sorrows endured. At the beginning of every year, all of us imagine fresh possibilities, goals to be achieved and the promise of happiness. And, yet, on the 12th day of 2010 I went from excitement and anticipation to the depth of despair. A beautiful and loving son, a middle school teacher who was devoted to his

students, and all who admired and respected Glenn's carefree, easy going life were suddenly facing an unimaginable loss.

I never imagined that I'd join the sisterhood of parents who've lost children prematurely. Our family was acutely aware of his condition – a unique genetic disorder, called – Ehlers-Danlos Syndrome (EDS for short). Yet, in spite of the odds, his outlook, activities, and zest for life never gave us any indicators that we'd lose Glenn so soon. It was both unimaginable and unthinkable.

This is a mother's journey of going from light to darkness and back to the light. It was a tough trip. Your mind is filled with regrets. You look back and wish you had handled certain situations differently. You recall the decisions that had lasting impact. Admittedly, Glenn and I weren't best friends. As hard as we both tried, and I really believe we did our best, there was a constant edge in our relationship, similar to a nagging ache or pain that doesn't go away.

Although Glenn's condition was diagnosed as genetic rather than hereditary, I guess deep inside of me existed a gnawing feeling that somehow, in some way, I was responsible for his shortened life. Each time we talked about it, he did his best to reassure me that he felt no anger or resentment toward me for what he had to endure – continuous hospital stays, operations, treatments, and on and off sickness. Because of the recurring challenges he faced over the years, I often avoided honest communication. Not wanting to cause any more discomfort than he was already enduring, to say "I walked on egg shells" is in many ways the truth.

My journey began slowly and without direction. Sympathy cards and condolences kept coming even from individuals with whom I had lost contact. Somehow they found out about my loss and wanted to express their sorrow. You felt and appreciated their need to offer support. It helped. It was really challenging to find a 'good day' or a 'pain free day' when my life as it had been was torn apart. My faith was shaken and no one could really understand my broken heart.

In the beginning I found the most comfort in books. They were written by well-known authors who focused their writing on death and dying. In reading stories of near death experiences or individuals who communicate to loved ones after dying, I slowly began to accept the possibility that Glenn would find a way to connect with me. I even had a few sessions with individuals who have the capacity to communicate 'with the other side'. During one particular instance, I was actually told that Glenn was present with me, loved me, and wanted me to know he is safe and happy. His reassurance through a third party was overwhelming and I held onto that experience for a long, long time. Since then, on my own, I have repeatedly asked Glenn to communicate – a light touch, a vision, a whisper. While it hasn't happened yet, it doesn't stop me from still asking!

Glenn's smile shines on me every day. There's a beautiful picture of him sitting at his school desk that I've placed beside my work area on my computer desk. It helps me to glance at him throughout the day and think that the smile is really here. I have placed other reminders throughout my home so Glenn is never far from view. I suppose others do the same thing. Each of us in our own way does our best to hold onto memories and pictures to keep loved ones ever present and close by.

Healing happens as time passes. You focus on all the good memories. You build your faith and trust and slowly accept those circumstances over which you have no control. You change what you can control – yourself.

Not long ago, a friend sent me the following short poem by Mary Elizabeth Frye (1932) that really helped me see light once more:

*Do not stand at my grave and weep.
I am not there, I do not sleep.
Do not stand at my grave and cry.
I am not there, I did not die.*

I've done my share of asking, "WHY?" Why did this happen to my son? Why did he have to endure so much suffering between times of joy and well-being? Why did God end his life when he was just beginning to *live*? It was almost easy for me to overlook Glenn's illness because everything around him was so positive. But he could never forget. He lived his reality. He dealt with it. He recognized he *had* to live with gusto when he felt at his best. He *knew* better than any of us his time was running out.

The journey that ultimately brings understanding and acceptance must be traveled individually. There is no answer to the 'why' that plagues all who suffer. It's taken me a long time to recognize that the question is not 'why' did something happen the way it did. The answer comes from finding the strength to believe in the invisible, trust in the way life unfolds and be grateful.

As I mentioned earlier, Glenn loved teaching. His enthusiasm for Science, for the kids in his classroom, and for the staff and administration were fulfilling parts of his life. He'd share stories and brag about the progress his students were making. You could feel his energy and happiness in his calling as an educator. The classroom was a great diversion for what was going on in his personal life. No one ever knew of his health challenges. He never wanted anyone to treat him differently if they were aware of his fragileness.

As a family, we wanted to do something special in honor of Glenn's memory. We came up with the idea to provide an annual financial award to a deserving 7th grade Science student. In some small way, this gesture would keep Glenn connected with the school he loved for years to come. A plaque currently hangs in the school's hallway with the names and years of three students voted by teachers as the outstanding student based on an essay contest. Returning to Hull Middle School for the annual awards assembly has been a great blessing, and part of our healing.

There's a saying that goes something like – *You can't possibly know what it feels like to walk in someone else's shoes*. It has more meaning to me now than it ever did before losing Glenn. People are suffering every day. Individuals everywhere are dealing with death and dying. No one can ever know how one will respond to life's toughest challenges until it happens. At the time of Glenn's death, I was often asked, "How will you ever get through the loss of your son?" I didn't have an answer. What could I say? For a while, I was dying inside. The expression – one day at a time – could never have been more real than it was three years ago.

Today, I love my son more than ever. I made a choice to remember the best of times. I know that he is without pain and that God did have a plan for Glenn when he was taken from us on the day of the Haiti earthquake. God chose Glenn because HE knew that my son was the perfect person to welcome, to embrace and entertain the children of Haiti that lost their lives under horrific circumstances. I choose to believe this because Glenn loved children. And, there is no doubt that that's what he's doing right now.

We can find hope. We can move on even when facing the challenges that feel like climbing Mt. Everest one step at a time. I have moved from darkness to light. If you are facing a difficult time, I know you can get through to the light as well. Give yourself time. Trust that if you are willing to be patient, answers will come. Know that what we *see* is not necessarily what *is*. We can only do our best, be our best and have faith that our journey has purpose. Seek meaning for yourself. Don't ask *why*. Ask yourself, how can I grow from what I am experiencing? How can I become a better person? What can I do to strengthen my faith and be a light to others? Light overcomes darkness. All you have to do is light a candle to know this is true. May my story inspire you to meet your challenges with courage, faith and trust. You are never alone.