

Sam's Story: Remembering a Friend

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It was an afternoon in early January and I had just arrived at our church to prepare for a Cub Scout meeting. I and my co-leader were engaged in the tricky process of opening the door to the building when Annette, a member of our LDS ward drove up, very agitated. When we went over to see what was wrong, the first words I remember hearing were, "Sam's dead."

I was confused. My mind started racing through all the people I knew named "Sam" (it was a long list—it must be a very popular name), but I couldn't see how any of them could be dead. Then Annette clarified that the "Sam" in question was actually Samantha, a 16-year-old girl in our ward who was a good friend of both my daughters.

The first thing that popped into my head was that it must have been a car accident. I mean, isn't that how most teenagers die? Then I began to worry about whom else might have been in the car with her, was there another car involved, etc.

Of course, all of these things went through my head in the space of about a half of a second.

Then I finally thought to ask, "How did it happen?"

Annette said, "She shot herself."

At that point, so many things ran through my brain I'm surprised it didn't explode. I had visions of Sam the dancer, Sam the soccer player, Sam the musician, Sam who was everyone's friend, Sam with the biggest smile in the world. So I said the first coherent thing I could think of, which was, "You're kidding."

Duh. Who kids about something like that?

Annette said Sam had been dealing with depression for a long time. I almost said, "You're kidding," again, but stopped myself in time. I had no idea. And my husband had been her bishop.

We put a note on the church door saying scouts had been cancelled and I began walking home very slowly. For one, I was in a state of shock, and two, I didn't know how I was going to walk into our house and tell our children what had happened. You see, our oldest daughter, Kelsey, who was just a year older than Sam, was also dealing with depression. She had been hospitalized in seventh grade after she attempted suicide. What would this do to her?

I called my husband. I asked, "Did you know?"

I called the principal of the junior high where I worked, and which Sam had attended and her younger sister still attended. We were supposed to be having our faculty holiday dinner that night. I knew there were teachers who were going to be devastated when they found out, and I couldn't even imagine what the students would be like the next day. (FYI – it was beyond awful.)

By then I had reached my house. I know I went in, I know I gathered my daughters and my son around and told them what had happened, but I can't remember what I said or how I said it. I remember seeing my daughters' faces crumble. I remember my son – who was still in elementary school – saying, "She said 'hi' to me the last time I saw her and I didn't really say anything back – do you

think she thought I didn't like her?" He was so afraid that he might have somehow done something that contributed to her death.

I remember we cried. A *lot*.

My son asked me what he could do to help her family. I said, "Write something you remember about Samantha." He wrote the most beautiful letter about how he remembered bumping into her at the orthodontist one time and she had talked to him and that made him feel good.

I woke up at three in the morning and couldn't sleep, because I knew Sam's family probably wasn't sleeping, either. So I got up and wrote my own letter to them, sealed it in an envelope with my son's letter, drove over to their house and left it on the doorstep. It felt so inadequate, but I remembered a scripture which talks about promising to "mourn with those who mourn, and comfort those who stand in need of comforting."

At Sam's viewing, I couldn't even say anything to her mom. We just hugged each other and she whispered in my ear, "Watch Kelsey."

It has been over four years since Sam died. All my children still keep a picture of her in their rooms. When Sam's younger sister graduated high school this year, I wondered what Sam would have been doing if she had still been alive. I ache every time I think of what could have been. And frankly, I do watch my daughter, because I know the unthinkable can happen.

I just hope it never happens to me.