

A Lesson of Loss

They were going to be late for school.

Ava Warcaba and her younger brother, Jake, sat quietly at their kitchen table. The only companion to their silence was the soft morning light flowing into the room through the window. They were fully dressed, and had made sure to pack their backpacks and lunches. The assembled bags rested on the ground next to them. Everything and everyone was ready to go.

Except for their mom. The driver.

They were going to be late if she didn't come down soon. The minutes ticked by as the siblings sat in silence. Until finally, their mom came staggering down the stairs slurring her words as she approached her waiting children.

Mom's acting weird again, Ava thought. She would never say such a thing out loud to her mom. That was a sure way to trigger an explosion.

But they were running late, so Ava and her brother followed their mom to the car. She got into the car, slipped her seatbelt on for safety, even though she felt anything but safe. The car started down the driveway to head out of the family's neighborhood in Chagrin Falls, Ohio. They had barely left their cul-de-sac when in the blink of an eye everything flipped upside down.

Literally.

Their mom had slipped the car into a ditch before they had even made it out of the neighborhood. Quickly, the neighbors began pouring out of their houses to see what the commotion was. Only to see that it was the same as always.

Ava and Jake scrambled out of the car. Ava's cheeks burned red with embarrassment as they ran back home to call their dad and the police.

She was six years old.

Now 22, Ava is a senior at Denison University in Granville, Ohio, and is a member of the women's basketball team. She reflected back on her childhood and her mom.

What happened that morning was not an uncommon occurrence. Her mom, Laura, suffered from alcoholism and addiction. The disease controlled every aspect of her life, and as a result of that, her family's lives.

Alcohol use disorder, also referred to as alcoholism, is a medical condition characterized by the inability to stop or control use of alcohol despite negative social, occupational, or health consequences (National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism.) It can range from mild to severe, with addiction being the most severe form of any substance abuse disorder. The American Society of Addiction Medicine classifies addiction as a chronic brain disorder because addiction alters a person's brain chemistry, which is why it is nearly impossible for people to stop once their abuse of a substance reaches addiction (The Cleveland Clinic.)

"My mom was a pretty bad alcoholic since I was, I don't even know, for as long as I can remember," Ava said. "I didn't really know what alcoholism was when I was younger, so I kind of just classified it as her acting weird."

From an early age, she would come home from school to find her mom unconscious on the couch. This happened more often than not. Her mom would fall all the time, resulting in a broken nose or a sliced open head, because she was so drunk that she could not walk. She was unable to do anything.

"There wasn't a day that went by that she wasn't either drinking or medicated. She was on a lot of pills for depression and anxiety, and so she would mix the two and it would just become a disaster," Ava said.

The scariest thing her mom would do was drink and drive. Just like that morning when she was six, her mom would often get behind the wheel while drunk. Putting her family in the position of having to call the police to go and pull her over.

She recalled her mom getting pulled over while picking her younger brother up from the movies, with her brother in the car, and receiving a DUI, driving under the influence, offense. Unfortunately, some of these DUIs would make it into their local paper, much to the Warcaba family's dismay.

"There were just a lot of situations where she put us in really, really dangerous positions," Ava said.

As a result, she spent much of her childhood taking care of her mom instead of the other way around.

"In my teen years, younger teen years, I would stay home from events and not hang out with friends. I'd do anything to like, take care of her and make sure she didn't fall or hurt something or get sick. I would kind of just always be by her side at the house," she said. "I was always taking care of her and then also taking care of my younger brother while my dad was at work."

Whenever she could, she would scour the house for her mom's hidden stash of alcohol and pour it out. She was desperate to get her to stop. Sadly, doing this would always cause her mom to explode on her.

"I didn't really know any better. I still wanted to trust that she was my mom, and she was gonna take care of me," Ava said.

As Laura's addiction progressed, her dad, John, put her and her two brothers into an Alateen program. Alateen programs are support groups for children and teens struggling with the

effects of someone else's drinking problem (Ohio Al-Anon Family Groups.) They went to these once or twice a week for a short period of time.

While the kids went to Alateen to cope, Laura had many stints in and out of rehab none of which were successful. Laura continued to revert back to drinking and self medicating.

For Ava, hearing about other people's similar experiences was comforting, but at the same time it was not changing anything. It didn't change the fact that her mom was sick and in such a horrible position with alcohol. There was nothing anyone could say that would make things change from the way they were.

Eventually, Ava quit the caretaker act. She disconnected with her mom, and stopped caring. She was tired of being the caretaker and not the one being taken care of. She was tired of dealing with the worst of her moms behavior caused by alcohol or relating to the addiction.

"I was just always, always, always on edge. I couldn't fall asleep at night, unless my dad was in the house. If he would go on a work trip I would be up the whole weekend. I just never felt safe with her in the house ever," she said.

After she hit her breaking point, she did everything she could to not be at her house. She would spend the night at her friends' houses for weekends. She lost hope that her mom's addiction was ever going to get better. She took a step back, and separated herself mentally and physically from her mom.

This went on until the spring of 2019.

In April, Ava's junior year of high school, she was getting ready to leave for an Amateur Athletic Union basketball tournament that would hopefully help her get recruited to play in college. Ava was dressed in her team's uniform and ready to go. The tournament was an

hour and a half away, so they needed to leave soon. Her mom came into the room, obviously intoxicated.

The sight lit a fire in Ava's stomach.

A torrent of anger induced words spewed from her mouth. She couldn't stop herself, she was just too upset. She told her mom that she wasn't allowed to come to her game because all she ever did was embarrass her and the family. She did not want her there.

Steaming from the encounter, Ava got into the car with her dad and headed to her game. She calmed down, and by the time they completed their long drive she was in the zone, ready to play..

After her game, when they were back in the car, her dad told her that her mom had fallen and was in the hospital. She thought nothing of this. Her mom fell all the time.

That night Ava went to a friend's birthday party. Her mom's fall was in the back of her mind, but she pushed it aside and enjoyed her time with her friends. She was sure everything would be fine.

Little did she know the situation was much more serious.

The next day, her dad sat her down and told her that her mom had fallen from the very top of the stairs down to the bottom while drunk. She was taken to the hospital where she went into a coma as a result of the accident.

In that moment, the guilt from what Ava had said to her mom before she left came crashing down on her.

Days went by with Ava and her brother visiting the hospital, their dad spent his nights there. They went to school and tried to pretend that everything was normal.

It was in mid May, when the doctors pulled her and her family aside and asked them to come sit down in one of their offices. At that moment she knew her mom was not going to wake up. She sat in shock and listened as the doctors told them her mom wasn't going to come out of the coma.

It didn't feel real as she sat next to her mom and told her that she loved her, and forgave her for her addiction. She did not cry.

"After everything I had been through with her, just like the physical, mental and emotional abuse that her addiction had on us, I just didn't know how to feel about it," Ava said. "I just felt really awful for not being more upset in the moment."

The day of the funeral came, it was held at the same church where her mom and dad were married. Ava, alongside her brother, vaguely remembers speaking to those in attendance about their mom. She has most of this day blocked out of her memory.

When they went to bury Laura, her heart broke as she watched her dad sobbing as he got on his hands and knees to kiss Laura's tombstone.

"That was probably the hardest thing for me, because my dad is the most important person to me. And seeing him so upset and hopeless and in pain was just like the worst feeling ever to me. That just broke my heart," she said.

When her mom passed, it was almost as if she was mourning her for a second time. The first time was mourning the mom she never had. Growing up, Ava would often find herself gravitating toward other people's moms, wishing for that kind of mother daughter relationship. She wished she had someone to dress her up and take her shopping, a wish that could never come true.

Following her mom's passing, Ava felt relieved. Her experience was worlds different from someone who lost a parent to cancer or a sudden accident. In her eyes, her mom had gone long before her last fall. Ava had so much anger, confusion, and animosity toward her mom. When she lost her mom, she was guilty because of the things she said to her before she passed, and, more importantly, the things she didn't say. Looking back, she believes she could have had more empathy toward her mom, but she was too young.

"But at the same time, I also felt really relieved that I wouldn't have to bear the weight of her addiction anymore. And it wouldn't continue to take a toll on me because I just don't think it would have ever stopped," Ava said.

Ava still has moments when she has to work through the emotions of sadness, anger, grief, and relief, the relief of being able to have the college experience she has had without having to worry about her mom.

When it comes to the loss of a loved one, there is no clear cut path to navigate loss. Some cases are more complex than others, but all have one thing in common, grief. Jack Wheeler, a licensed clinical social worker and Director of Student Wellness at Denison, has direct contact with students dealing with all kinds of loss.

"There's no right or wrong. Stop stretching yourself, do what you need to be doing right now. Find the right time, place, and people to talk about it when you're ready," Jack said. "And that can be on campus with a professional, it can be off campus with a professional, and it can be at home with family. But only you know when and where and with whom."

When Ava walks across the graduation stage and receives her degree from Denison, she will carry her mom with her, all of her sadness and struggles, but she will also radiate maturity, independence and compassion. It is now she can grow and know her mom loves her and will

always be proud.

She will not be the only student carrying a story of loss. With each step across the stage, all who supported her on her journey and those in the midst of their own battle with grief will be brought together, never forgetting, but finding a path, a different path of hope and understanding.

Photo:



Photo by Emma Pritchett.