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## SURVIVING SUICIDE LOSS: ONE MOTHER'S STORY

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### THE NIGHT THAT LIFE CHANGED

It was September 10, 2020. The pandemic was still affecting everyday life across the globe. I was lying in bed, half-asleep, when I thought I heard noises downstairs — like someone was knocking at the door. It was close to midnight, so I thought I must've been imagining it. I tuned it out, chalking it up to the neighbors being noisy. Shortly after I put it out of my mind, my phone lit up as it buzzed across the bedside table. It was my brother-in-law. Why was he calling me so late? I debated answering in my groggy state of mind — it was so late, I was so sleepy.

But, I was also so curious. So, after a few rings, I did answer it — rather cheerfully for that time of night. His voice was low and soothing as he told me over and over that I needed to go downstairs and answer the door. At that point, I was completely confused. How in the world did Dane know that there was someone at my door? My tired, yet inquisitive mind insisted on knowing *how* he knew someone was knocking and *why* I needed to answer the door. It's safe to say that I was not, at that point, at all grasping the severity of the situation. I even entertained the thought that he had — with my sister's help — orchestrated some grand surprise for me on the other side of the door, and this unusual phone call was the last bit of the plan. Still confused and the slightest bit hopeful, I slowly climbed out of bed and groggily made my way down the stairs with the phone still pressed to my ear. Dane stayed on the line with me, softly coaxing me with each step, and repeating the same answer to all of my questions: "Just go answer the door."

Arriving at the door, I peered through the peephole, but the dark night made it nearly impossible to make out who was standing at my front door with any certainty. With my mind still reeling, I opened the door, and I clearly saw two men in Army dress. In that moment, the swirling questions and speculation rolled to a stop. That's when it finally hit me. My life is about to change. I knew there was only one reason these men would be at my door in the middle of the night.

"Are you Ava Henrickson?" one of them asked. I nodded as swear words snuck past my lips.

The heartbreaking moments that followed were uneasy and blurry. I remember clumsily making the walk from the door to my couch — a familiar walk I'd done thousands of times, but suddenly my feet were lost — as I ushered the two men inside. The older of the two men handled introductions for them both. He was a chaplain, and the younger man with him was a notification officer. I remember looking at the young notification officer and being sure he would rather be anywhere else but in my living room as the chaplain gently told me that Adam, my precious son, died.



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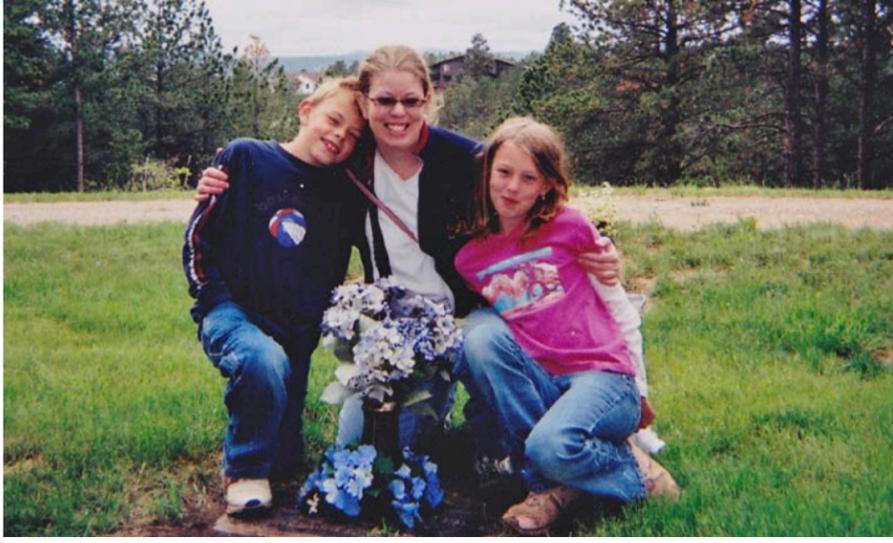
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My mind struggled to absorb that word. And somewhere between the chaplain sharing in careful detail that Adam died by suicide and the notification officer beginning to speak, “The Secretary of the Army regrets...” this mother’s heart broke and a dense mental fog rolled in.

The chaplain asked if I’d like my sister to come in just as she walked through the door. Telling her what I’d just learned about Adam added an uncomfortable realness to it. I reached for her and fell into her arms as we both digested the news through tears.

I can’t recall how long I stayed there in my sister’s arms, but I know that the chaplain and notification officer eventually left. A quiet filled the living room once they were gone. I sat quietly in the company of my sister, Angie, and brother-in-law, Dane, who was also now in my living room. There were questions swirling behind our eyes, but we just sat and stared, none of us speaking or really processing yet what we’d just heard.

The silence was only broken when I acknowledged the knot in my stomach alerting me that I had to tell my daughter, Alissa. As I pieced the words together, and Alissa used every word to make meaning out of what I was saying, tears flowed on both ends of the line.

## **THE DAYS THAT FOLLOWED**

In the days after the notification, I felt so out of control. The absolute worst thing that could happen had happened. We had so little information in those early days, but what we did know, my brain couldn’t possibly process through the fog and the shock. Despite the all-encompassing questions dancing in my head, all I truly wanted was to hold my sweet son in my arms again and never let go.

The blurry day after the notification, Angie and Dane left — likely to get some sleep. My own eyes eventually stopped fighting sleep, and I managed to rest for a little while. At some point on day two, my best friend rushed to be by my side. We talked about the next steps, and she helped me fill the quiet as I anxiously waited for the phone to ring. When the ring finally chimed out, it was around 3 p.m. On the other end of the line was Colorado National Guardsman SGT (Sergeant) Ryan Teetering on behalf of the U.S. Army. He would be my casualty assistance officer, and his voice would become so familiar to me in the days that followed. He listened carefully to all of my questions, and promised only what he could — to try to have some answers for us at the arranged meeting the following morning. What I wanted most — to know where my son was

and hold him again — he couldn't promise. At the time of his death, Adam was stationed in Germany — a place he dreamed of exploring, but it was so far from home, so far from me.

The days that followed ran together, but I recall clearly that I was rarely alone. Friends and family managed visitors and food deliveries. I met with my casualty assistance officer often, and I was surrounded by my support system every time — they diligently took notes and offered questions I couldn't think of.

SGT (Sergeant) Teeter did his best to get answers for us, but the days stretched on. Each day, I awoke with the hope that I would finally get the answers to the *when, where, how, and why* questions. I knew that getting the details of what happened would be very difficult to hear, but I needed to know everything. The problem was — as I know now — I'd never know everything. I'd never be able to know what Adam was thinking.

When the answers I sought finally came, and we were able to connect with the special agent in charge in Germany across the eight-hour time difference between Germany and Denver, it was painful, just as I knew it would be.

## FOUR YEARS LATER

My first thought as I opened the door the night of the notification was right. My life *did* change right then and there. I lost my precious son and I became a surviving mother.

Being a surviving mother in those first days looks a lot different than it does now, nearly four years later. Today, in honor of Adam, I advocate for mental health and suicide awareness. I share my story and Adam's story in hopes that it will reach someone who desperately needs to hear it. Along my grief journey, I participated in a documentary on grief. Today, I regularly attend grief groups to continue nurturing my grief. Healing is a process, and I actively participate in mine. In Adam's memory, I strive every day to live a life that honors his too-short life. The team of support that rallied around me the night my life changed and the days that followed are still with me today. I feel very fortunate to have had all these people beside me each step of the way.

## MY SON

Adam was a skilled mechanic, photographer, writer, artist, lover of cats, and an all-around genuine, nice guy. He is remembered for his sensitive nature and prankster sense of humor, and he is missed more than words can say.





## RESOURCES FOR SUICIDE-LOSS SURVIVORS

At TAPS, we understand the complex emotions, questions, and issues that accompany suicide grief. If you have lost a military or veteran service member to suicide, you are not alone, and you have a safe place with TAPS. Begin by reading the 10 things we know to be true about suicide loss (</resources/suicide-loss/#tentthings>) and see the resources TAPS has carefully created for suicide-loss survivors (</resources/suicide-loss/>).

*Ava Henrickson is the surviving mother of SSGT (Staff Sergeant) Adam Henrickson, U.S. Army.*

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