

Fear Me Out Podcast

Episode 5

Hosted by Clinical Psychologist - Dana P. Saperstein PhD.

Guest Speaker

Berkley Johnson - Death

Dr. Dana 00:11

There are two basic motivating forces fear and love. When we're afraid, we pull back from life. When we're in love, we open up to all that life has to offer with passion, excitement, and acceptance.

Fear Me Out 00:30

Coming to you from our studio in Santa Barbara, California. This is the fear me out podcast. We're not your typical Self Help Program. Our show takes a deep dive into those psychological issues that affect us on a daily basis. We hope to shift your perspective and have you experiencing emotions differently. Now here are your hosts Kim Fauskee and Dr. Dana Saperstein.

Kim Fauskee 00:52

The loss of a child is not an event. It is an indescribable journey of survival. On today's episode, we sit down with Berkley Auggie Johnson who received the call that no parent ever wants to receive. His son was only 19 years old. This is a story not only of a family overcoming the death of a child, but surviving a natural disaster Three years later, that claimed the lives of 23 of their neighbors. This promises to be a very raw and candid conversation regarding perseverance, faith and resilience. So Auggie I was describing to Dana how you're probably one of the most kind genuine and gentle souls that I've ever met that you're one of the good guys out there truly one of the good guys. So I know you the listening audience, some people may know you, but for those who don't know you, who is Auggie Johnson.

Berkley Johnson 01:45

Oh, well, thank you very much. I, I would say that you should talk to my wife. She'll set you straight on a number of the the notes you just made about me, right?

Kim Fauskee 01:53

Allow her to come on a future episode and I ain't correct anything I just said,

Berkley Johnson 01:57

Okay. All right. Well, I'm Auggie Johnson. I was born in Berkeley, California with my wife. We went to high school together and I've known her since high school. I liked her in high school, but she was dating a teammate of mine, you know, the code. You couldn't break that up but she went to UCLA and she, she came to UCLA and we started dating and we've been in Santa Barbara for 25 years and raised four children here. And she's a pediatrician at a pediatric Sofer at Sansom. And she's continued to be a

pediatrician there. And I've worked many jobs here locally, salesman and for various financial institutions, and many of my jobs had to do with coaching our kids in Little League and softball and volleyball and basketball and growing through the local organizations here. Really enjoyed our time on the central coast here, and we'll be here. We're lifers.

Kim Fauskee 02:58

You talked about coaching, and you and I met through CrossFit a number of years ago, and you are still competitive athletes?

Berkley Johnson 03:06

Yes, yes, I continue. Both my wife and I wrote for UCLA and played water polo for you to say a little bit. And we've continued to enjoy the discipline of the sports. And I wrote the head of the Charles every year and a team and continue to throw down wherever I can. It's a joy in my life, I can still do that.

Kim Fauskee 03:28

You've probably had to talk about this subject. Quite a bit, and maybe more than you want to but you had a 19 year old son that that died suddenly and died tragically. And can you tell us a little bit about who Nick was?

Berkley Johnson 03:45

Sure. Nick was a great kid. You know, your first kid, everything is such a big experience. So I got to experience all the, you know, the joys of those first years and I got to coach him throughout his before high school and he picked up the love of water polo early on. But he was a great basketball player. He run the one the grand P pre running cup for six years in a row for his age group. And he was just a good solid kid. love sports, very open and honest. Kid, I got the joy of when he got older to he came to our CrossFit gym and so we gotta throw down in the gym a lot. CrossFit is a very intense high energy sport where you kind of, you know, whatever person's defenses are up at the end of the beginning of the day, they're knocked out and you get to see people as they really are. And he was a good kid. He went to Santa he went up to the Santa Barbara High School it started at Montecito union and they went to Santa Barbara Junior High Santa Barbara High School. met his love in Santa Barbara High School. Charlotte Hendricks the Hendricks family is a local water polo family. And they were together all through high school. And then he stayed in Santa Barbara as a, Donnie went to UCSB and became a star water polo player there at UCSB. And one day, during break, he was getting extra training in at Santa Barbara High School. And he was a very fast swimmer, too fast for the groups that were there. And so they gave him his own lane. And he was doing underwater repeats where you hyperventilate, and then you go into the water and go back and forth. And since he was on his own lane, they just, they just didn't see him in time, he fell asleep at the bottom of the pool. And then we got that call that, you know, every parent dreads, you know, your son is going to the emergency room at the hospital, you know, and you think, Oh, he must have hit his head or slipped and fell or something like that. So, you know, you go to the hospital, you drive that lonely drive to the hospital. And and I, you know, to the the moment I got there, I thought okay, well, we'll hold his hand when he's you know,

Kim Fauskee 06:11

so you know, when you had no indication, at least in the initial phone call how serious this event was, at that point, not

Berkley Johnson 06:18

I mean, my wife had called me, they had called her and it was he was on the deck and he's being transported to the hospital. And then that first moment, when I got in, I saw the religious person standing there at the doors, nice, older lady with a cross on it. And that's when I thought, Oh, my God, you know, my worst fears, you know, that that person is not usually standing there waiting for you. So it must be much more serious then. Then I understood it, just you know, and then they walk you in and there is your son on the table being worked out by a team of expert people trying to bring him back. And you stand there watching them work. And

Kim Fauskee 07:05

so you're actually in the room while they're working on your son?

Berkley Johnson 07:09

Yes, right there. There's nowhere else to go to the emergency room and, and my wife is there and we're holding each other and we're looking at our son and they're doing heroic measures. And they've been doing heroic measures for some time, all the way from the pool deck. And there's, you know, you just can't understand that you know, that the fears are realized there, there is no place to hide, there's not like, what if it is happening and and then you just try to live, you know, you try to go from there.

Kim Fauskee 07:44

Did it feel like you had lost all sense of reality at that moment? No, if that makes everything

Berkley Johnson 07:51

is so sharp, It's like I was there yesterday. There are some not loss of reality, there is some surreal nature to it, there are people in a corner that don't understand that my son is dying, they're, you know, reading a newspaper, or, you know, or having a cup of coffee laughing about the movie that they saw. That's happening 10 feet away from where they're trying to save my son. So there's an eye ear just looking around. And some people are, in the moment, trying to do what it takes to bring them back. And there's others that have no clue. You're just in your little bubble, that life is continuing on outside of this life as it continues on outside of this room. It is just this one little bubble of intensity. And there's nothing we could do you know, and they tried, and they tried. And I think they probably tried more than that, because we were standing there, they probably went to the ends of the earth to try it and sometimes their heartbeat would come back sometimes it wouldn't. And then eventually it just did not come back and they couldn't save them. So

Dr. Dana 08:55

ever explain to you what it is that happened to him that

Berkley Johnson 08:59

yes, they the you know, the final issue is that something called Shallow water blackout is the actual technical term of it. And it's a way that happens to the best of athletes in the water a lot of times to seal

to SEAL team members who died right after Nick for the same reason. It happens where you can trick your body into not understanding that it needs to breathe. It thinks, you know when we go underwater, we feel this need to breathe, your lungs feel like to explode. You can actually with shallow water blackout blackout Trickett, so it doesn't feel like you need to breathe, you have no inclination to breathe, and then you're just out and you're already way past the bounds of because your body's already sucked up all the oxygen so you have a very narrow window to survive once you go out

Kim Fauskee 09:51

in Nick had done that type of training before. He

Berkley Johnson 09:55

I mean, everybody thinks about going underwater, you know, so swimmers all the time, hold their breath and go underwater. There's just a certain technique that you can do or you can trick your body into not knowing how to breathe. And it's a deadly, obviously a deadly experience when, when it happens. His coach Wolf, who goes a three time Olympian, had Shallow water blackout when he was younger. And his father, who was his coach at the time, jumped in and saved him. There was another local athlete that had the same thing happened to him with the D people, but they got to him quickly, and he got out. And

Dr. Dana 10:34

so no one's gonna notice your son was in distress,

Berkley Johnson 10:37

he was just in his own lane, and they just didn't see him in time. And by the time they got home, it was too late. So, you know, the obviously the, you know, that was seven years ago, and I could tell you every second of every moment of that day, and the days afterwards, you know,

Dr. Dana 10:57

what were the days afterward like for you?

Berkley Johnson 11:00

One of my sons was playing water polo in Europe, in Hungary, and he had, you know, he had just started playing there, and he had to come back. It's, you know, it's the gathering of all the family in the, you know, trying to figure out what, what to do next, there was a first child that had passed from our extended family. And we had friends and everyone that knew Nick, and, you know, how do you how do you move forward? How do you? How do you take one foot and move it to the next and, you know, my wife and I both work full time, and we had to, you know, eventually go back to our jobs and our kids had to go back to school? And how do you make it in a way that your family doesn't fracture? That your kids don't go off the deep end that year? You know, there's a lot of, you know, I blame myself with his intensity to the point that he needed to swim so hard, you know, he, you go through a bunch of self doubt what, what if I'd done it differently? What if I had raised him differently? Without that?

Dr. Dana 12:09

So you did feel a sense of guilt that maybe you pushed him too hard? Certainly,

Berkley Johnson 12:13

certainly, I worried that my own wife would feel that I had, you know, you just you go through 1000 permutations of what if, you know, I'd done it differently, or, and to this day, you get slight reflections of Geez, you know,

Dr. Dana 12:30

yeah. Well, I don't know that a parent could ever get over the death of a child. I think you get learned to cope.

Berkley Johnson 12:36

Yeah, you try to find ways of turning that death into a positive, you celebrate life rather than mourn his death and I really think, knowing Nick that he would want he would be angry if I thought about that a lot. He'd be angry if I was too sad, do not operate going forward, that can celebrate what a wonder, you know, he had love. You know, he found love. He, he, he was respected for his craft. He, he, he got to do a lot of really neat things in his 19 years. And I'm glad that he had those years,

Dr. Dana 13:15

where you and your wife able to stay connected to each other because like you say, for a tree of a family happens oftentimes with a catastrophic loss.

Berkley Johnson 13:23

Yes, there's certainly you got to work through how it's like there's a fracture, if not an explosion of the family. And it's how you put the pieces back together, the pieces never come back together perfectly. There's scars and risks and gullies and hills but we got through it, my wife and I continue to try to celebrate life and she continues to work in her profession, I continue to work in mine. And we have three other children. That's another thing you know, you can't dwell on the one you want your children to thrive. And we were fortunate that we, you know, that swim community in this town, the water, Pelican music, close knit community, we had a lot of love and everyone helped us and one of my sons became a physicist out of Berkeley. And the second one is a mechanical engineer who works for Elon Musk on the starship down in Texas and my daughter's about ready to go to college. So, you know, they got through it, but it was had some heavy lifting there for several years.

Dr. Dana 14:34

I can imagine Can I actually can't imagine having children. It's hard. It's it's just inconceivable.

Berkley Johnson 14:41

Yeah, yeah, we miss them every day. You know, and Eugene, you try to do things that reduce the, you know, there were moments where I would go back to work, you have to go back to work. So two months in, I'm in a meeting, and I can't. I don't even know what they're saying. I don't know why I'm there. And You look for, you know, I gotta say, alcohol made a positive difference in my life. It sounds terrible, you know, you don't want to become an alcoholic. But there are moments where the intensity is so intense that there's nowhere to escape and you have a drink or, and cut the edge enough that you can get to the next moment of his dancing.

Dr. Dana 15:24

Have you been able to sort of only use it? medicinally? Yeah. And not sort of become a habit? Yes.

Berkley Johnson 15:31

Yeah. I mean, I almost joke about you know, having a beer with a friend is very medicinal. Yes, having tall shots of tequila less so.

Dr. Dana 15:42

And it did you notice that your relationships with friends and other people changed a bit as a result of what happened? Yes.

Berkley Johnson 15:49

Yes, it did. Certainly, we had good friends, and they're staying close. And it was wonderful. But many of our friends love us. But it's hard to be around people that are in that grief, it really is as much as you love them. Right there. Every time you see them, you're reminded of the horror of that time that grief. So everyone came together a lot. We had lots of friends surrounding us for about six months. But then, you know, many of those people are gone. Not because we, you know, they dislike us or anything. It's just we're, we're a heavy load to handle as a friend,

Dr. Dana 16:26

what you represent is their worst nightmare. And a lot of times people can't deal with those fears of having the same thing happen to them. And so they figure the easiest way is just to avoid whatever might remind them of their worst nightmare. Yeah. Which is really sad, because you ended up feeling like you've lost some good friends as a result.

Berkley Johnson 16:46

Yeah. But those that are still there, it's a much richer experience. I mean, you have no, there's no defense. And

Kim Fauskee 16:53

did you Did you sense a feeling of awkwardness around friends or friends awkwardness toward you of not knowing what to say not knowing what to do? Or how to handle the situation?

Berkley Johnson 17:05

Absolutely there. And they fall into different categories that some are so horrified. They're trying to work through their own horror and fear. And so they can't they bring it up to you, you know, and they say, I can't imagine, you know, I can't imagine what you're going through, it must be terrible, you'll never get over it. Well, thank you. I hope that's not the case, I hope that I can get over it. And that, you know, that Nick will be with me in a positive and loving way for the rest of my life. You know, but that's, that's what they say to, right? Because they have to get it out for themselves. And so they don't mean it's not like they're trying to be selfish, but they're not trying to, it's all fear based find a way to survive their own fear. And there are others that will talk about it. Others who don't want anything to do with that subject will talk about anything but that time. You know, I absolutely try to, I think Nick is, is with me all the time.

So do you feel His presence? Yeah, I do. I do. Not always, but there was one moment, several years ago, or it's always at night, that's the hardest time and I'm in bed and I couldn't sleep and I was just going through the whole day, which repeats in my head a lot. And just you get that desperate, kind of without any other input in the middle of the night, you get a kind of a rebound where it just kind of grows and grows into almost a panic. And, there was a moment there. I said, Geez, you know, I'm going to explode. And then I got this vision in my head. It came unbidden. And it was Nick coming to a he was a fisherman, he loved fishing, the fishing, we have tattoos of fish, our arms, and he's just an avid fisherman, anything here in the channel, he was out hunting. And it was, I had a vision of him going towards Mountain Lake. It was a quiet lake in the morning. Sun's coming up over the mountains. And he had a rod in his hand and he was intense, focused on going to that lake. And it was such a clearer vision that I was immediately at peace. And maybe that's the body's attempt to survive the minds attempt. My minds attempt to survive and find a way of rationalizing it, but it was so clear and so calm, that I was like, He's okay. You know, and it almost made me feel like, I can't wait to see him again.

Dr. Dana 19:37

Yeah. Have you? Have you had any other sort of experiences where you feel like he's sort of tried to ease your pain a little bit? Yeah.

Berkley Johnson 19:46

Well, I'll tell you. About three years ago, we were in the mudslide, the Montecito. mudslide, right. And that night was a crazy night. It was you know, we

Dr. Dana 19:58

realized that life for you Well, we

Berkley Johnson 20:01

barely survived. I mean, we got to the point where we were, you know, we were close to dying we were in the mud chipping away our house we're on the top of our roof and I'm saying goodbye to our children. I'm sorry that you know, it was right down to the wire but we all survived and you know, there you could spend an hour talking about that night. But the ultimate thing was the odds of all those things lining up that I woke up. You know, just minutes before the mud hit our house and how did you wake up? I just shouldn't have woken up I'd gone to bed late and I was in a peaceful sleep in my bed but something woke me up. I don't know if it was something that made me get my clothes on and all my gear which I never do in the middle of the night. So they

Dr. Dana 20:50

just had a really strong feeling strong feeling and do you think it's possible that your son woke you up from asleep? I think is that how you look at it? I do. Yeah,

Berkley Johnson 20:59

I do. And God us you know my mother son was going to go from UCSB where he was studying to a friend's house that night and take care of it and at the last second he decided not to he just fell out do it in the morning so we stayed in that house was disappeared. Wow you know my daughter and my wife were asleep down on the bottom floor both of them at the last second unbeknownst to me decided let's

just go upstairs and both of our you know our house our our room was wiped out I think if my wife had slept with me maybe I wouldn't have woken up you know, my daughter was Her room was gone. And so it's it's incredible the odds of of all of us surviving that night really truly if you add them all up it's billions to one considering where where we were when

Dr. Dana 21:53

dear other family members sort of believed that there was some divine intervention i don't know I'm not sure you guys haven't necessarily talked about the fact that maybe your son kind of was trying to take care of everybody

Berkley Johnson 22:09

possibly we all felt just incredibly lucky and you know we lost everything and that morning we had no no computer no phone no ID no clothes no roof on the roof of your house everything had been gone just taken out that we had everything chipped away from our house and we just were the the fireplace was was the strong area and so the next day we were kind of it were mud up to our eyes and we just had to start again you know, restart and find a way to you know, literally with nothing come back again. And but I think of Nick as being a true positive like it was like a blip on the radar screen my daughter was back in school three days later you know with with borrowed clothes and a borrowed backpack and when I was back at work you know we were in a hotel room you know just starting to live again get you know getting an ID and a passport and yeah,

Dr. Dana 23:11

so while you were standing on the roof What were you guys experiencing

Berkley Johnson 23:16

well it was a you know the the main flow was taking you away our house and there was a gas main that the head of it had been cut off and so there was like a jet engine of gas permeating just soaking in all the area in the air. This roar of gas and it wasn't on fire. It wasn't on for the one up above it exploded and caught fire. I think so let

Kim Fauskee 23:47

me let me just clarify for our listeners who don't know about the Montecito debris flow or live here in Santa Barbara. And on January 9 2018. At about three or four in the morning. Auggie Santa Barbara area had just experienced a major wildfire about a month earlier and we had a true torrential downpour rainstorm on that night in January that caused a lot of the mountain behind your home to come down which included boulders and trees and mud and water and cars that literally flew through a majority of homes in your area including your your home. So I just for those who didn't understand what we were actually talking about here. Now they can have a frame of reference of what happened and again, like we said in the intro, unfortunately they claimed the lives of 24 people.

Berkley Johnson 24:46

Yes, yeah. Good friends of mine that lived upstream of where I lived. Yeah. And yeah, that it was just chaos up there was a huge tank and cars and parts of homes and bodies just flowing down past us. And it was, you know, you don't know if you're gonna make it but then you do and and you're standing

there with your children and your wife. Yeah. And, and we just didn't. I didn't know if I could throw a child to a lower impact area, you know, off the roof. It was just trying to go through every permutation. How do you survive? And you think that would be traumatic, but I'll tell you that the thing what Nick did for us again, a gift of His was that it was a you know, rebuilding from scratch was an a blip on the radar screen, compared to losing a neck. I mean, I think that alone would have been a very horrible experience to try to survive and get through and lose everything, lose your wedding albums, lose your every picture you ever had. And we were before the cloud, you know, everything we owned, every memory of Nick, everything, you know, just going down stream, you know, so you literally start with nothing and you start building your life again, your memories again and your pictures. And

Kim Fauskee 26:12

I think there's another very important part of that story for Auggie. as if I remember the story correctly. At some point, you're on the roof of your home with your family. And I believe that you heard a cry for help.

Berkley Johnson 26:29

Well, or it was it was actually I mean, we were up there for probably 40 minutes of Intel the mud started to die down. It was chest level. But we could wait through it. And some county firemen had pre positioned some some assets, about 100 yards out towards the escape route. And so we were able to get the whole family to fight through the mud to these firemen, which were trying to, you know, they were just coming on to chaos to it was trying to figure find people and find them in their houses. And I was able to see everyone in our lane of you know, a little lane that were they were live except for one house just below us where a mom and her two kids lived. One of our cars was on what was left of a roof and in the hole inside and then caved in by the mud. So I was worried that they were buried. So when we got to the road, the county fire guys, I told them that there was one house, I saw I could count for everybody except for this one house. And so they geared up. And they went with me back to the area of the main hit. And in that the jet engine of that gas was very loud. So you couldn't hear very much. But we were searching through this house trying to find this lady and her two kids. And in that rubble mound just before their house, there was a small bit of noise and the you could down through all the you know, you could imagine there's this huge pile of twisted metal and concrete and rebar and rock stone had come from a half a mile upstream and smashed in our house and then as a low pressure zone piled up behind the houses that happened at various places around Montecito. That's where you found people and things. So once there was that little bit of noise, you could see a little bit of an elbow. And a little bit of movement down in this hole filled with mud and rock and the firemen there got all their gear and they called all their people in and then throwing everything we could try to get down to this arm. It was pulled out of there. And I thought it might be one of the little boys, which meant the mom or the other boy was there. My wife who's a pediatrician was over near the fireman, the county fire guy and I went over to her and she looked at and said this, this, this is a baby. It's not a young boy. It's just a little baby. It's not one of these, she didn't think it was one of the two so it came from somewhere else. And as it turned out that little baby had come from a half a mile upstream and had been carved out of his little bed and had been somehow survived all that rock and reborn stone for half a mile just a baby two year old child and then deposited and then been piled up on top of it and it survived. And again I think that the miracle of that you know how you could be in here that little teeny squeak how you could find you actually heard the little you can hear a little bit and then and then how it

could be deposited in it had been there for at least an hour or more at the bottom of that mud mud pit. You know unfortunately, many of its family members didn't survive but a lot today and I get to spend time with him and Jay

Dr. Dana 30:00

Yeah, you've developed Have you developed a relationship with him

Berkley Johnson 30:02

with the with the Father? Yes. And, and I hope to be in his life forever. Wow. Yeah.

Dr. Dana 30:09

That is really remarkable. He's

Berkley Johnson 30:10

a great kid.

Kim Fauskee 30:11

Yeah. Was he injured? It'll

Berkley Johnson 30:18

be a HIPAA violation to talk about them, but they survived. He survived.

Kim Fauskee 30:24

Okay. Yeah. Yeah.

Dr. Dana 30:27

And do you feel again, that this was part of your destiny to get involved with a little guy and also sort of having a part of your life?

Berkley Johnson 30:35

Absolutely. I mean, I support the family in any way that I can and, and will continue to be his friend. And hopefully, as he gets older, and we can have more substantive discussions, talking about how we can make a positive impact on the future with him, and

Dr. Dana 30:51

how does he relate to you? Does he co maybe like, as an uncle or though I'm

Berkley Johnson 30:55

just I'm just still a small child and my, my interaction with him? It's not fully formed yet. But I do, I am there whenever.

Dr. Dana 31:08

Yeah. And you can feel it in your heart that he's somebody that I guess, in a way now, I don't mean to put words in your mouth. But do you think that your son was sort of involved in that also, to help you heal your heart in a certain way? Well,

Berkley Johnson 31:23

I again, I go back to I'm, I'm, I'm not religious by nature, but certainly become spiritual in some form or fashion. And I can't imagine that we would have found that child without some type of guidance. Somehow, because there's, there's no way we should have found that no way he should be alive the way we should have found him. After all that.

Dr. Dana 31:48

For us, yeah,

Berkley Johnson 31:49

it is. I mean, it's crazy, in some ways, how, you know, but again, going back to fear, you know, the gift that Nick gave me as I've realized my worst fears, and I'm still alive and still productive, and my family has realized its worst fears, and we're going to celebrate life. That's the gift that he gave me as, I don't think I always celebrate life, I was worried about paying the mortgage and not have enough money. Where are we going with our livelihoods? Direct, I don't care about any of that stuff. I'm going to enjoy the time on this earth, and try to give enjoyment to others the same way.

Dr. Dana 32:29

So really, his death was a fundamental moment in your life in ways that you probably never expected?

Berkley Johnson 32:35

Yeah, absolutely. For sure.

Kim Fauskee 32:38

I'm interested in hearing how your other kids have dealt with these dramatic events in their life and what you and your wife have done to support them and, and how their perspective and trajectory may have changed from all of this.

Berkley Johnson 32:57

Yeah, well, you know, talking about not putting words in their mouth, it'd be good to have that conversation with them. I'd be curious. You know, I haven't asked them that specific question. We'll ask from your perspective, yeah. But from my perspective, each of them internalize it in different ways. Um, you know, my old my second oldest, which is now the oldest living son, you know, he was in Europe when it happened. And so he wasn't there, that moment, he had to come back, I had to think about it process it differently than everyone else that was at the heart. You know, I, my younger son, I brought into the hospital, so he could say goodbye to Nick and hold his hand. So he got that experience. My oldest son didn't get that experience, he had to come in. And, you know, and I, I probably, I was, in a, I didn't know what I was doing, or how to operate effectively, either how to talk to them or what to say to them. I was operating in the dark and was in shock myself. So he came in the door. I said, now you're the oldest you have to, you know, take on that mantle that Nick added probably the wrong thing to say

to him. You know, he was certainly not certainly at that moment, but I thought it was trying to help him say, you know, we're gonna get this together. You know, that was, you know, that didn't help him with his, you know, oh my God, I've got a responsibility that I never had before. And I was just playing water polo in Europe. I'm trying to.

Kim Fauskee 34:19

He's a pro he's trying to process on his own. Yeah. So I

Berkley Johnson 34:23

didn't do him any favors when he walked in the door type of thing. I was trying to do some emotionally positive thing

Kim Fauskee 34:30

that you know, nobody preps us for these things happening in our life. And you know, and we don't want to even think about it hypothetically ever happening, right? So your instincts kick in and you just say or do what you think is right at the moment. Right. And then you second guess yourself down the road. Yeah.

Berkley Johnson 34:47

Yeah. Right. So your each, my, my daughter didn't want to. At the time she was very young and didn't want to see Nick. My older son was able to process it more Warren, it'll be interesting to see how as time goes by each one of them develops their own fears? Or does the impact of those early moments somehow modify their behavior? From where it was before?

Kim Fauskee 35:17

Did you see any change? I mean, this is probably a rhetorical question. But did you see change in them almost immediately at all, and how they live their life, or how they dealt with you and your wife, or relationships, have their own friends or school or anything like that?

Berkley Johnson 35:33

Yeah, I not I mean, they were good students, they continue to be good students, we try I think, you know, a long time ago, I was a salesman, and I was gone, you know, every week, and I used to go out in the field and be back three days later, my wife had four kids and a full time, Doctor job, and I leave him. And she have to take care of the entire family, all the travel and school and everything and do her job. And I was gone, frolicking in the sales fields of the world. And I was out all over the country selling and then coming back, and I would be gone for three or four days, and they'll come back, I feel guilty. So I would get all of my kids presents. And I would walk in the door, and here's my wife fighting to get them in the bed, and I'm the hero bringing presents home and causing really more disruption than what I should have. And, then they begin to expect the presence of you know, even when I was gone for a day here, and where's my present type of thing, I realized I was doing more harm than good. So what I learned was that if however long I was gone, if I just came right in the door, as if I had never left. And so is your homework is done and didn't make a big thing about it, they wouldn't make a big thing about it. They just, it became Dad's here. Dad's not doesn't matter. And I think I tried to do that with the death of Nick the same way. You know, Nick died. Okay. We've grieved, okay? Is your homework done? You

know, where are you going to go this weekend, you know, are you going to move with the friends who're going to be there, you know, just try to be a dad, as if you'd be a normal dad as if nothing had happened. And I think, from my perspective, that it helped smooth out some of the highs and lows that happened after death, you know, it's like that, you get these big mountains of grief, that just wash over, you can't do anything. And then you get, you know, a moment of peace, and then you dreading the next mountain of grief that's going to wash over you. And you become dysfunctional in your work or your marriage or your all those things. But if I could keep it steady, maybe it would give enough time for those ripples to die down. And we could just get back to living was that your experience? I think that was for the most part of our expense. I mean, the proof to me was the kids grades. I mean, if they had crashed and all gotten, you know, gotten in drugs and trouble and problems, I think I would have probably didn't get through without bad scores, but they, they, to this day, they're functioning and, and moving forward. And I'm hopeful we did the right thing, you know, time will tell.

Dr. Dana 38:22

And they don't speak much about his stuff. At this point in your life.

Berkley Johnson 38:28

No, I mean, again, one of the things that we try, I tried to do. And again, each kid and my wife is different than I do, but try to embrace it every day, you know, to bring Nick's name up in conversation as if he was there a remember when Nick, you know, won the Grand Prix, and we went to that thing, and we met those people, those people just you know, their daughter just had a baby, you know, or, you know, some of that and try to keep him close. Right after the funeral. All the older kids had disappeared, and we didn't know where they'd gone after the funeral. And then they came back. And what they've done is one of the one of our relatives had designed a tattoo with the waves of Santa Barbara and Nick's initials in the middle with a fishhook because again, he was a fisherman, and they had all gone out after the funeral and gotten this tattoo. Wow. And it became kind of a thematic element and all the relatives that we know went out and got this tattoo. And about a year later, I hired a local photographer here, Dave Kay, who his great guy. And I had him go around the country to wherever they were to take photos of them doing their most passionate thing was a runner up. And as a runner, he has a picture of her running along Mount Hood with her tattoo on her ankle. Another one Oh, sweet. Yeah. Charlotte Hendricks has a tattoo and is a water polo player. So I have this book of all of all the people that love Nick and all relatives with their tattoo To end is really lovely. So, you know, you can do pots, silly little positive things that turn out to be something that you can look at the person enjoy rather than sorrow, that's what I continue to try to do. That's the way I can try to remain healthy myself is to find ways of having joy.

Dr. Dana 40:18

You know, you bring up a really good point. And sometimes a person gets lost in the bitterness of what happened. And sounds like you've tried really hard to deal with the sorrow, but not to feel sorry for yourself, which is a really big difference. So you guys acknowledged how sad it was, but didn't sort of see yourself as being victims of the, of the situation. And that's, in some ways how you avoid the bitterness that can take over your life. If that's what I mean, that's just a remarkable way to do it is to find fun, you know, ways to celebrate what a lovely person that he was.

Berkley Johnson 40:58

Yeah, I think the I think you're right, that there's that little bit of poison from the bitterness of you know, you see it, I see it a lot in, people die when the first thing you hear is a loss, someone's look representing them for the lawsuit, right? Because they're so angry that had happened, right. You know, within a day of that happening, you know, the, like, I wanted to see where he passed away, I wanted to go to the site, Sheriff and understand that he his last moment of life was in this pool, Santa Barbara High pool. And they pulled him to the side and wanted to see where he's lying and where they're trying to save his life. Or maybe his spirit left him, you know, and that the county was so afraid of the legal ramifications, the they had to have, like senior administration, people from the city and from the school to be there with you to be there with me. Because it What a crazy thing, but I understand it now, you know, because the first inclination of people when they're angry is to lash out at indiscriminately, you know, there has to be somebody else to blame for someone has to be someone to blame. And I could, you know, I could have met, you know, I did not want to sue, I would never have imagined suing the high school or that just adds compounds. The, I mean, what are you going to do? He's gone, it doesn't matter. But I, but I get the inclination for why people do it. I don't think it helps, though. In the future. I really don't, I think, like you said, trying to find a way to be positive. I think about my own daughter, probably one of the strongest, you know, if you match, she's a water polo player, she's gonna go play water polo division one next year. For her whole career at Santa Barbara High, she has had to swim over the spot where her older brother died every day of her life at the very pool. Every time we go see a game at the pool every day, we have to see where our Sunday it's like going to a gravestone every day of our lives. And she's had to be there in that water in the water that he was in.

Dr. Dana 43:13

Does she say anything about that as troublesome to her in any way? Or does she look at it, like, you know, her brother's like, just hanging out with her. And, and one of

Berkley Johnson 43:20

the things coach Walsh did at the time did a great thing he had kind of, I think I think it was a Hawaiian celebration, but he did some type of celebration of the water, celebration of life, in the water and in the pool. And he kind of blessed it with a casual way, after the thing. And I think that was helpful to her, I think helpful to her, but it's just it takes pure strength, you know, to go to that pool every day and say, you know, cheer and clap. And of course, no, it's kind of like that hospital say nobody knows. That part of it. You know, I don't say anything in the pool. I don't bend down when I'm in private moments, I'd bend down to the summit where he died and a kiss. Right, but I don't do that when anyone else is around that kind of thing.

Kim Fauskee 44:06

So when you walk into the pool deck now, what's your what's your first thought? Is it a positive thought about that bad experience in that pool in that campus? Or?

Berkley Johnson 44:19

It's certainly where I want to be. It's not always, you know, my, my wife, again, it's hard for her to go there and cheer and, you know, it's just, you have to do it. But it's hard. There's no, it's not perfect. You know? No, I don't, I don't get great joy. Jumping in the pool. I love it. When she wins our game. We

celebrate the wins. We mourn the losses, but we don't really talk about it. It's too much to go into that every time you get on the pool deck.

Kim Fauskee 44:51

And there was no consideration for your daughter about playing at a different school because of what happened to her brother.

Berkley Johnson 44:57

I think early on she was fearful about that first day of school Getting on the water, you know, and, and we haven't talked about it that much. But she did it, and she's in it and she has to search for a school. And she's not going to change schools because of that, which shows to her her strength and character. And she wanted that tattoo that everyone else got of Nick, and she's underage. So, but she's strong. And so we've, we took her to a country that would allow her to have that tattoo. So she got the tattoo when she was 16. She, she continues to amaze me with her own resiliency and strength.

Kim Fauskee 45:36

I know that you didn't want to speak for your kids. And you gave us a nice perception of, of how you feel that your kids have dealt with these issues. You've mentioned your wife, who's a physician in this town. But we haven't really talked about how she dealt with it. And the process. And again, she's not here. And I know that you probably would rather her speak about that. But certainly, what's your perception of how your wife has processed and dealt with a lot of these traumatic issues in terms of how you've done it and how she's done it?

Berkley Johnson 46:12

Well, she's probably a little more quiet about it than I am, I'm my I can I can only really speak to my own, you know, exactly. I'm very reluctant to talk to her about her because she may totally object to my, my perception of how she deals and handles it. But for me talking about Nick has always been therapeutic and a positive thing. I had an old boss back in the day. And he always was talking about financials, they said Auggie sunlight is the best disinfectant. And I've always kept that with me, you know, the fact that you bring sunlight to a subject or to a fear or to, you know, whatever is troubling you, if you can bring it out into the light, it usually lessens the the impact of whatever that issue is, and I, I believe that so for me, my health has been to talk about it and to embrace it, for better or worse, because they're certainly worse to for my wife, I think, you know, she she comes from the medical profession, she sees sick children every day for almost 30 years. She's she, she's maybe more pragmatic about death, maybe possibly just from her professional perspective and keeping a sanity about being with sick people all the time and how you have to be professional about it. So she has more of a medical perspective, maybe but she's grieved long and hard as I have and I don't think she wears her grief on her sleeve probably like I do.

Kim Fauskee 47:57

Have you experienced any form of family death prior to your son dying that was either sudden or or tragic that may have given you a little bit more perspective going into this?

Berkley Johnson 48:10

Yeah, well as as you know, we talked about the resonance of the spiritual side. My own older sister, I, we had my three boys and a daughter and her daughter and my family and our family. In my family growing up, there were 3.3 Girls, and I was the youngest. My oldest sister committed suicide when she was when I was in high school about the same time as my son Sam was in high school. So if there's some uncanny, eerie timing relationships with the whole thing, but I got to see, you know, when, when, when my sister committed suicide, my parents checked out. I mean, they just checked out. And, you know, I had my graduation from high school three months later, you know, I went to that graduation on my own, no one went to my graduation, I, I went to my college graduation on my own, you know, they just checked out after that. So I had some experience about just, you know, being parents have to go through their own grieving process. And I was trying not to replicate what my parents did when my own sister passed away. With my own son, Sam, my, who's now my oldest living sign, you know, he had to do the same thing. It was a really tough time. He was just in his senior year. He's got three months, he's got to go through the celebration of graduation. He's got to, you know, smile for the cameras and hold up his plaque and go to his senior prom and we have to celebrate that senior prom and be happy and wave and do all the things that you do to me. You can normalize life. And that was really hard on him and us and but he should have deserved that. Right To Be happy. And I think that one of the hardest challenges I've had is to, you know, we're spending all this time talking about Nick and grief, but he's gone. And our children, those are the ones that we have to support and celebrate moving forward. You know, Nick is a part of our life, he's in the fabric of our souls. But he would want us to move forward. And that is the challenge as to how do you support and strengthen your kids and not let them go off the deep end while you're grieving? on your own? Yeah.

Kim Fauskee 50:37

Did you feel that you had to pick up the ball that your parents dropped with your other siblings? And were they will? Did you have older siblings?

Berkley Johnson 50:46

I was the youngest. I didn't I was I just remember being incredibly angry at everything just for years. super angry at why why she got to the point that she did, you know, how did that happen? And in my, my effort to understand that I, I worked for United Way as a crisis, suicide rate Prevention Hotline type of person, I worked at nights, I did my day job. And then at night, I would work at night at this call center for for crisis and

Kim Fauskee 51:21

in your sister's suicide, got you to do that type of work. Okay. Yeah.

Berkley Johnson 51:27

I wanted to, I just wanted it one try to try to help other people that were having trouble, but then to help help myself to under you know, just try to live through the embrace it. One of the things I kind of learned through that process those years on that suicide crisis hotline was that for, for many people, you know, everyone has a fear or crisis, and although we had this catastrophic crisis of our child, you know, a crisis could be losing a dog or, you know, getting fired, it doesn't, you know, that can just be a searing to that person is what it was, to us, everyone has, you know, fear and crisis, and what kind of my own experience of that process was that it wasn't always the wasn't the first thing that caused suicidal

ideation or, or real crisis it was the is sometimes the second blow, you know, losing Nick was, you know, in a bubble, and we were able to survive it, if we lost Nick and then lost another family member, or, you know, had lost our jobs, or, you know, if someone gets divorced and then loses their job, it's the one two punch, that was always have a higher level of suicidal ideation or potential suicide risk than just being the one loss, you know, everyone can absorb one hit, it's the second and third tertiary hits, that we have to be prepared for, you know, as they come down the road, we were lucky that enough time I think it passed between Nick passing, and losing our, our home in our memories and everything, that we were able to treat them as separate events. And Nick actually strengthened us for that rather than weakening us that process.

Dr. Dana 53:17

That's actually an interesting perspective. And sometimes grief doesn't follow linear time. It just a part of time. And so sometimes, you know, visiting a house in a situation after that could have multiplied but it doesn't sound like it did that for you at all.

Berkley Johnson 53:34

No. And, I think it was the timing of the events probably. You know, we were far stronger when that house when we lost our house and home and we shrugged it off pretty rapidly. I mean, there's obviously some sadness that we, you know, sure, our kids that the place that they grew up was no longer and certainly some tears over losing our everything that we had, but

Dr. Dana 54:00

are you back in that house now?

Berkley Johnson 54:04

We were going to try to be I was following that pattern of strength. I was like, Yes, we're going to rebuild and get back to it. But then the first rainfall came. And we were like, looking for our baggage. How do we get jump in the car and escape? And I didn't want you know, the idea of potentially putting my children back in the path of something like that. Just I couldn't imagine going through that again, right. Or risking your fate about tempting. You'd hear people rebuilding on the Florida coast after hurricane. I was like, No, I

Dr. Dana 54:37

don't I think I'm gonna have some like a good idea for

Berkley Johnson 54:40

less apocalyptic elevation. So we moved about six blocks away, but at a much higher elevation. Okay.

Dr. Dana 54:47

Well, that was probably actually a really smart thing to do. Because I think that sometimes people try to just be brave and and assume that that's never gonna happen again. And instead, you made a decision that helped everybody feel safer. I'm a Assuming Yes, yeah, yes, I feel like home, have you been able to kind of make it your home? We just It

Berkley Johnson 55:05

took years to finally get the building permits and get. So we just have moved in. And it's, it's, it's different than what we had. But we're slowly integrating into it. Okay. And but I believe it's, it's great. And the first rain came, we didn't have to evacuate. Right?

Dr. Dana 55:24

Right. So, you know, amazingly enough, there are still people coming to see me, who have sort of delayed post traumatic stress from that event. Some of those people are teenagers, they were young teenagers at the time, and have no at the end of their teen years and are starting to have trouble sleeping. And whenever it rains, they start to panic. And the most common way that teenagers try to handle trauma is by just sort of pushing it away and try not to think about it. When they push their feelings down, their feelings come out sideways in the form of symptoms like insomnia or anxiety. So I've certainly had to tell a few young people, you know, you can't just pretend like what you saw, and what you experienced didn't happen. That's not the way to handle the situation at all. So it's good that you guys, you know, initially were able to be with each other and take care of each other.

Berkley Johnson 56:17

I think it helped, that makes a big difference. Certainly I'm sensitized to where we are, and I look for outlets and sightlines. And wherever I am I check the environment and the weather report a little absolute fixture, I know it's coming down the pipe.

Dr. Dana 56:33

When I was going to school, I worked in a psychiatric ward for a really long time. And now whenever I walk into a room, I never sit with my back to the door for the same reason that you're talking about, because I realized that that was the most dangerous position in the room. So I think we all make little compensations for, you know, to try to keep ourselves as safe as we can when we experience things that are really frightening and overwhelming.

Berkley Johnson 56:56

Yeah, yeah, we've embraced the cloud, putting all of our pictures on the cloud that's keeping memories.

Kim Fauskee 57:05

So we're coming to the end of our conversation here. Again, really appreciate you being here. Auggie. And one of the things that I wanted to do to kind of in this conversation, I think it ended appropriately is to kind of pay a tribute to your son, Nick, he wrote a personal anthem that I think that you found on his computer. After his passing, yes, he wrote it the day before he passed the day before he passed. And if you would like me to read it, I'll read it if you would like to read it. Okay,

Berkley Johnson 57:39

I'm gonna I would try, but I wouldn't make it I'm gonna try and

Kim Fauskee 57:41

do it without breaking up either here.

Berkley Johnson 57:45

Just to give you context, he was out. He, he loved his team, his water polo, he really was passionate about it. And he was never the biggest or the strongest. But I always told him, You didn't have to be the biggest or the strongest, you just had to work the hardest. And he was always the first to get in the pool and the last to leave. And he believed strongly if you did that, that it would help the team. And, and that's what he believed in. He was absolutely committed to the team. And he was going to make that team win by his effort. And I think he wrote that to himself as something to remind him of where he came from and what he was about.

Kim Fauskee 58:45

I am going to take a deep breath and try and get through this air. Where do you go when the buzzer sounds and the stance clear? Do you look towards your team and say to yourself that you did everything you could do? Or do you hold your head up and never make the same mistakes again? When the other team is taller, stronger? Do you become physically weaker or mentally tougher? When all of a sudden done? Do you accept defeat or rise and rise again? You're a human being the loss of physical ability do not govern you. You are the one thing on earth holding yourself back and moving yourself forward. What other people say and do means nothing because you're the master of your fate and nobody can tell you otherwise. People with less motivation less drive less ambition will try to tell you the world has its limits. They'll give you some damn good excuses as to why there's no point in trying. But they don't define your reality you do. Only you decide when you've had enough. No one else can decide when it's your time to call it quits. Only you can face your team At the end of the day and live with who you are, so go on and be great. Be everything you thought you could be. Shock the World and be the underdog come from behind winner. In a world where things don't always add up. How you choose to act is all that matters. Be All You can be. Good luck. Augie thanks for being here. Sure. I really appreciate it.

Berkley Johnson 1:00:22

Yeah, thank you.

Fear Me Out 1:00:24

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