

MENTAL HEALTH AWARENESS

Take A Stand

BY TERRY BENTLEY HILL

Palm Sunday, 1995, 10:35 p.m.

In my front yard, the news crews with their live trucks interrupted regular programming to report that the 47th District Attorney had taken his life in the home where his four daughters slept. Years of struggling with alcoholism and depression overwhelmed his higher thoughts, his reasonable thoughts, his clear thoughts and led him into the black hole of hopelessness and anger that fueled his horrible decision to walk into our bedroom with a gun to end his suffering and pain. In his suicide note(s) he wrote that I would be better off without him and that I would find a better father for our children.

Portrait of a Super Lawyer

Danny Hill's 1973 Texas Tech Law School class could be considered the breeding ground for elected District Attorneys. In the Panhandle, alone, four alumni held the position of top prosecutor. By the time Danny ran for 47th District Attorney he had served two terms in the Texas House of Representatives for the 86th District. At 34-years-of-age he was the youngest DA in the state. Whip smart and charismatic he demanded a lot of himself. He tried many cases and the juries never returned the two-word verdict. Innovative, he created the Special Crimes Unit, which investigates serious criminal offenses, and began the Victim Assistance Program, which a majority of Texas DA's offices implemented. And, nine months before he died, he was named Prosecutor of the Year in Texas.

The Deadly Shadow of Shame

Danny took his first drink of alcohol his senior year in high school, and it was that drink, not the last drink, that killed him. Alcoholism is a progressive disease. Untreated, it can be a fatal disease. It is cunning, baffling, and powerful. It interferes with relationships, vocations, and hopes and dreams. It destroys the drinker; it destroys the family. Everybody gets sick. Couple the alcoholism with depression and

the combination is deadly.

No one really knows the secrets that lurk behind closed doors, but the secrets kept us sick. Shame kept us isolated and silent. Friends and family were never confided in or consulted. The repulsive notion of public exposure, scorn, and judgment kept Danny on a run-away train of substance abuse with the cliff of destruction looming closer and closer. Car accidents, chaos, violence, marital discord, and a removal suit created a perfect storm of deadly justification in the broken brain of my children's father: death over life.

Implosion

When a person dies by suicide, statistics show at least 18 people are directly affected. Suicide is the most complicated death to grieve. Often times the last words spoken are not ones of love and affection and the survivors are left reeling with the burden of responsibility and self-blame. Ten days after Danny died, I walked into my bathroom, looked at myself in the mirror, and did not recognize the person staring at me. I glanced over at the TV as special news report from Oklahoma City showed a collapsed building billowing in smoke surrounded by emergency vehicles, and when I glanced back at myself, I realized that building represented my life. Part of me died with Danny that night; I had so many questions, so many whys, but none that he could answer, and because of the public nature of Danny's death, I had nowhere to hide.

The Texas Lawyers Assistance Program

In 1998, the PBS station in the Panhandle produced an Edward R. Murrow Award winning documentary called *Danny Hill: Public Imagine/Private Pain*. In it, I spoke of our life and battle with addiction. The denial, the failed attempts to hide and control the illness, the fear that if we sought help that Danny's legal and political career would suffer. The Texas District and County Attorneys Association asked me to present the video and tell my story at its annual conference. The Association leadership bravely faced the undeniable fact that the stressors of the legal profession were taking a

toll on its members. When I presented, the room was packed with elected and assistant District Attorneys, many of whom knew Danny when he served as President. They heard from me, and they also heard from an Austin attorney and the Chief Justice of the 13th Court of Appeals who told their stories of recovery. They were volunteers with the Texas Lawyers Assistance Program (TLAP). As I listened to their brutally honest stories, I wished that Danny could have heard them. Maybe they would have given him the courage to face his issues, after all, they were highly successful and not ashamed of their struggles.

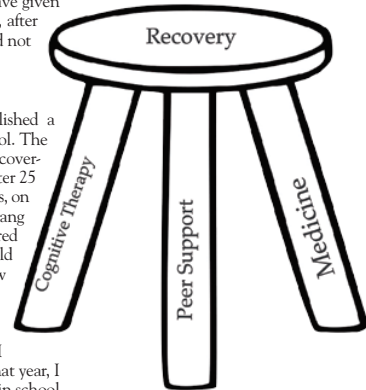
Collateral Damage

At the age of 47, I accomplished a long-term goal, I entered law school. The desire to practice law began while covering the courthouse as a news reporter 25 years earlier. Two weeks into classes, on a Wednesday evening, my phone rang and with it came news that shattered my heart...I lost my 14-year-old daughter to depression. I withdrew from school and went to therapy twice-a-week for nine months, I took medication to boost depleted Serotonin and Dopamine and I joined support groups. In July of that year, I had to decide whether to reenroll in school and resume my legal education. Grief shattered my confidence. It affected concentration, retention and focus. Sharing my fears during a therapy session, my counselor's words changed my life. She said, *I'm not in the business of telling my clients/patients what to do, but I am telling you—you are going to law school. You are going to take it one semester at a time and in three years when you walk across the stage and receive your hood and diploma you will know there is nothing you cannot accomplish.* Three years later, when I walked across the stage, the loudest cheers came from my three daughters.

Purpose for the Suffering

After receiving my bar results, the first call I made was to TLAP; remembering those two brave attorneys I met years before inspired me to volunteer. I have learned that Danny's story is not unique. Attorneys experience depression, anxiety,

and stress more than any other professionals. Substance and alcohol abuse is alarming especially for young attorneys in their first 10 years of practice. And, suicides and suicidal ideation are on the rise. It is the fear of exposure, the inability to pierce the veil of silence, a culture of perfectionism, the threat of economic consequences that drive our colleagues to tops of buildings and away from help.



The Solution

Mental illness and substance abuse are treatable conditions. Help is available to any Texas attorney through the Texas Lawyers Assistance Program, Lawyers Concerned for Lawyers, and the Confidential Depressive Group for Attorneys. Studies show that the most effective recovery from mental illness and addiction is like a three-legged stool. Each leg is dependent on the other: Medicine, Cognitive Therapy, and Peer Support. When you do not know where to turn, or if you know a colleague who is struggling, the 9-1-1 number for attorneys is 1-800-343-TLAP (8527). **HN**

Terry Bentley Hill is a Dallas attorney with a criminal defense practice. She is Chair of the DBA Peer Assistance Committee. She is married to attorney Tom Krampitz and is the mother of four daughters: Cadie (Florida), Lizzie (New York), Bentley (Austin), and Hallie (Heaven).

Top 10 List of Recovery Truisms

- 1. GRATITUDE:** A daily gratitude list of the things for which we are grateful keeps our minds focused on what we have, and not on what we don't have.
- 2. KINDNESS:** Like most antidepressants, kindness stimulates the production of Serotonin, the chemical that heals wounds, calms and makes one happy.
- 3. GRIEF:** You never get over it; you just get better.
- 4. HOPE:** There is no situation too great to be bettered and no unhappiness too great to be lessened.
- 5. FIRST THINGS FIRST:** Do the next right thing.
- 6. PERSPECTIVE:** There is an island of opportunity in the middle of every difficulty.
- 7. OPENNESS:** Our secrets keep us sick.
- 8. AWARENESS:** Keep your head where your feet are.
- 9. HEALING:** Being a little kinder, a little slower to anger, a little more loving makes life better, day-by-day.
- 10. FAITH:** A spiritual connection determines how well many deal with life.

TLAP SERVICES


- Confidentiality Services
- 24-hour hotline and crisis counseling
- Peer contact and support
- Referral to resources including lawyer support groups

- Confidentiality and immunity protections under Texas Health and Safety Code, Chapter 467
- Consultation and compliance services relating to TDRPC, Rule 803 "Reporting Professional Misconduct"
- Custom CLE program
- Stress management education

Facts About The Legal Profession's Mental Condition

- Depression is the highest of all professionals
- Attorneys are three times more likely to suffer from depression than other professions
- Attorneys are two times more likely to die by suicide
- 11% of attorneys contemplate suicide monthly
- The rate of death by suicide for lawyers is two to six times that of the general population
- Suicide is the 3rd leading cause of death after cancer and heart disease
- Studies show that 46% of attorneys report suffering from depression during their careers
- 18 people are directly affected by one person's suicide
- 36% of attorneys meet the criteria for substance use disorder
- Substance abuse increases the odds of suicide by six times

Source: ABA and Betty Ford Hazelden Foundation 2016 Report



Need Help? You're Not Alone.

Texas Lawyers' Assistance Program.....	(800) 343-8527
Alcoholics Anonymous.....	(214) 887-6699
Narcotics Anonymous.....	(972) 699-9306
Al Anon.....	(214) 363-0461
Mental Health Assoc.....	(214) 828-4192
Crisis Hotline.....	1-800-SUICIDE
Suicide Crisis Ctr SMU.....	(214) 828-1100
Metrocare Services.....	(214) 743-1200

More resources available online at www.dallasbar.org/content/peer-assistance-committee

MENTAL HEALTH AWARENESS

“While there are many worthwhile Committees and Sections at the DBA that you can (and should) get actively involved with, the Peer Assistance Committee is the only one where you can actually do something that could save a fellow attorney’s career, family . . . or even their life.”

—Joseph J. Wielebinski

“In any field, it can be lifesaving for the professional who is suffering to know that someone else has survived and can guide the way out.”

—Peer Assistance Committee Member

Professional Responsibility—Duty to Report

8.03(c) Reporting Professional Misconduct

(c) A lawyer having knowledge or suspecting that another lawyer or judge whose conduct the lawyer is required to report pursuant to paragraphs (a) or (b) of this Rule is impaired by chemical dependency on alcohol or drugs or by mental illness may report that person to an approved peer assistance program rather than to an appropriate disciplinary authority. If a lawyer elects that option, the lawyer’s report to the approved peer assistance program shall disclose any disciplinary violations that the reporting lawyer would otherwise have to disclose to the authorities referred to in paragraphs (a) and (b).

Resources

TLAP: Confidential. Respectful. Voluntary (Health & Safety Code §457)

Phone: 1.800.343.8527

Dallas Bar Association Peer Assistance Committee

Where: 2101 Ross Avenue, Dallas Texas 75201

When: Committee Meetings the 2nd Monday of the month.

Phone: 214.220.7400

Lawyers Concerned For Lawyers – Dallas Chapter

Where: First United Methodist Church, 1925 San Jacinto

When: Thursdays 12 pm – 1 pm

Lawyers Concerned For Lawyers – North Dallas/Plano Chapter

Where: Meridian Business Center Boardroom, 555 Republic

Dr. Suite 200, Plano, Texas

When: Tuesdays 12 pm – 1 pm

Confidential Support Group For Depressive Attorneys

Attendance limited to: Attorneys currently depressed and those seeking to maintain remission for the disease.

Where: Doubletree Hotel Campbell Centre, 8250 N. Central

Expressway, Dallas

When: 2nd Monday of the month. 6:15 pm – 8:00 pm

How Courage Came to the Cowardly

BY KELLY RENTZEL

I was a 21-year-old college senior when I was diagnosed with Bipolar I. It would be another 21 years before I publicly acknowledged my mental illness. The setting was a medium-sized room in North Dallas. Sixty-six people sat at long rectangular tables arranged end-to-end in five long rows. Most were lawyers there to attend yet another free CLE sponsored by the Dallas Bar Association. They had no idea that, over the next hour, they would be taken on my personal journey from mania to remission to depression to attempted suicide to shock treatment and back to remission again. At noon on August 11, 2017, my audience was looking for an easy hour of ethics credit.

To the best of my knowledge, aside from the few friends I had told, no one I had met during my 15 years of legal practice had suspected I had bipolar disorder. Not that the disorder had not been mentioned in my presence; in fact, quite the contrary: over the years, countless people had come into my office to complain of people other than me who, they proclaimed, were “bipolar”: jealous ex-husbands, angry co-workers, erratic siblings. By all appearances, I was well under the radar, especially now that I was general counsel of a bank. Still, I had assumed that the seminar’s title, “Disorder in the Court: Life as a Bipolar Lawyer,” would alert the audience to my bipolar status.

But moments before I stood up to speak, an older male lawyer I had met on a case years before asked me, “What do you know about bipolar lawyers?” There was still time to turn back. . . .

After more than two decades in hiding, I could feel myself defaulting to caution and cowardice. I didn’t have to admit my illness. I could say I had a bipolar colleague or friend. I could speak generically about the disorder: symptoms, treatment, famous sufferers. That would be the safe course—the course I had followed my entire career.

But I had already deviated from the “safe course” months before when I disclosed my condition to my employer. I had endured that uncomfortable exercise in order to give myself freedom to speak in public. There was no going back now. I looked up at the man and smiled. “I’m bipolar.” Then I stood up and, over the next 45 minutes, shared the whole self-incriminating story.

At the conclusion of my presentation, I asked the somewhat shell-shocked audience whether they had any questions. Several hands shot up. The first few questions

were relatively predictable: What medication was I on? How long ago did I receive shock treatment? Were bipolar people really more creative than other people? (Lithium, Wellbutrin, Ambien. Five years. There’s certainly a body of evidence to support this contention, and for further information, I recommend consulting my very favorite article ever, “You Don’t Have To Be Bipolar To Be a Genius, But It Helps.”)

I was on a roll. . . .until a distinguished-looking Indian man in the front row stopped me dead in my tracks:

“What gave you the courage to speak about this?”

I knew I could not give him an adequate answer. For one thing, I had only barely had the “courage” in question. I had toggled between courage and cowardice right up until I opened my mouth. Even when I did speak, I had approached the topic in a way that gave me distance from it. After (truthfully) telling the audience I had prayed for the courage to speak from the heart about my brain, I had launched into a *Wizard of Oz* metaphor: I, as Dorothy, had endured a tornadic storm (mania), then landed in a new world in which I was now an outsider (my post-diagnosis life), then traveled a long yellow brick road (remission), then endured a dark forest (anxiety/depression), and ended up fighting for my life against an evil witch (suicidal depression) before finally reaching the Emerald City (my current life as a happy, healthy, working mom). Somewhere between the tornado and the brick road—several minutes in—I had buried the word “bipolar.” It was about as third-person as a first-person story could be.

Standing before the audience, the best I could do was explain where the courage began: After I was diagnosed, I read all the books on bipolar disorder that I could find. I was so grateful to Kay Redfield Jamison and Patti Duke for sharing their stories, and I used their stories as inspiration. But I still felt so alone. I did not see any examples of people with bipolar disorder who

just went out and lived normal professional lives. I did not want others to feel as alone, hopeless, and limited as I did. So I promised my 21-year-old self that I would succeed in some type of professional career and then, once I got to a point where I could reasonably, safely do it, I would share my story.

After the presentation, the distinguished Indian man approached me. Shaking my hand, he introduced himself as Madhukar Trivedi. The name sounded vaguely familiar. Looking down at the card he handed me, I immediately realized why: Dr. Trivedi was Chief of the Division of Mood Disorders at UT Southwestern—the hospital where I had received the life-saving

shock treatment I had described minutes before. Leaning towards me, almost conspiratorially, he said, “This will get easier as you keep going. You will see how much your story helps people.”

Here was someone who knew exactly where courage comes from: encouragement.

The word “encourage,” it turns out, literally means, “to put courage in,” or, more fundamentally, “to put heart in;” its opposite, “discourage,” is composed of the roots “dis” (away) and “courage,” hence, its meaning: “to drive away from courage.” According to my trusty *Oxford English Dictionary*, a form of the word “discourage” first appeared in printed English (okay, Middle English) in 1481, while the word “encourage” came on the scene in 1490. Thus, there is etymological evidence that, as of at least 500 hundred years ago (and probably long before), people recognized that courage could be instilled in and removed from others. What can be given can also be taken away. (The effects of other people on courage and heart are very much worth discussing in the context of depression, and I hope to do so in a future writing.)

Words of encouragement are particularly powerful to me—mantras of courage. In the months leading up to my speech, I clung to a few in particular:

• “If they did, that would be the best federal case ever!”

“After more than two decades in hiding, I could feel myself defaulting to caution and cowardice. I didn’t have to admit my illness.”

—my former boss, a retired magistrate judge, after I expressed concern (thankfully, ultimately unfounded) that my superiors at work might demote me if I disclosed my disorder

• “In order to speak what you might regard as the truth, you have to let go of the outcome.”

—Dr. Jordan B. Peterson, psychology professor and author of *12 Rules for Life: An Antidote to Chaos*, in a Youtube clip entitled (unofficially by its poster) “Jordan Peterson - Speak your truth or pay the price,” available at <https://youtu.be/Aj39VL60Hgo>, which I must have watched at least 50 times before that first speech

• “Sometimes you just have to say, ‘Damn the torpedoes!’”

—my high school English teacher’s husband, who, though unfamiliar with Dr. Peterson’s above-cited statement, gave me this perfect five-syllable distillation of it during a much-needed telephonic pep talk the day before I disclosed my disorder at work

• “You’re in the bonnet; I’m in the wagon! Keep going!”

—my close friend and former co-clerk who, after I called her in a panic the day before my presentation, texted me a picture of a bonneted pioneer woman standing in tall prairie grass, Conestoga wagon behind her

The story I told that day was mine, but the story of *sharing my story* belongs to these people and so many others who provided encouragement as I made my slow advance to that first podium.

The next time I spoke in public, I had Dr. Trivedi’s words at my back. I also had the words of at least a hundred others who, in the wake of my first presentation, had written letters, e-mails, and Facebook messages. Every word had given me more courage. This time, there was no Dorothy, no cyclone. . . .no fiction at all. I walked onto the stage, leaned into the microphone, and spoke the impossible:

“Twenty-one years ago, I was diagnosed with bipolar disorder. . . .” **HN**

Kelly Rentzel is a Dallas native who graduated with honors from the Dedman School of Law at SMU. She is General Counsel at a Dallas bank. Kelly is mother to a seven-year-old daughter and lives in University Park. She is currently working on a book about her experiences.