

DEERFIELD

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First Person : *For Ian*

/ by Ashley Prout McAvey '92

On April 9, 2016, my beautiful brother and dearest friend, Ian Uppercu Prout '90, ended his life. From that point on, my life, and my family's, was bifurcated into two distinct periods: before April 9 and after April 9.

The pain of that finality, that physical loss, cannot be put into words. The deeper layer suicide survivors face—the questions—are haunting, particularly when the beautiful soul who perishes expended vast amounts of energy to keep their struggles so well hidden, as was the case with Ian.

For us who remained, the questions began relentlessly: When did Ian's pain begin? When was the first time he thought suicide was an answer? How could we have not seen the degree to which he was hurting? Why didn't he let us try to help him? How in the world could he think that we would be ok without him?

Ian was two years older than me. My big brother. We shared a room when we were little, and when I was three I was afraid of the dark, so every night I would say to him, "Brudy, turn around and look at me. Keep your eyes open." I knew if he was watching me, protecting me from the dark, I would have nothing to fear. He dutifully rolled his weary five-year-old body toward me and he would watch me until I fell asleep—every night. That was just the beginning. He grew into the most handsome, generous, kind, funny brother in the world. He owned a successful sports car driving business, and he held five track records at the most prominent race car tracks in the country. He had a wonderful girlfriend, amazing friends, an incredible home, a niece and nephew who adored him. And he had me, the proudest sister in the world, and my Mom and Dad, who gave both of us—in equal measure—love, support, and every opportunity imaginable.

In spite of all this, Ian's desire to keep it all together, and perhaps to not burden us with any of his struggles, became too much. His last act was not selfish. It was desperate. Suicide is not selfish. It is desperate. This revelation changed everything for me, and what happened in the days and weeks following Ian's death was, for me, the biggest shift in perspective I've ever had in my life.

Several years ago, there was a suicide near our family. I distinctly remember talking to Ian about it. Although I was deeply saddened for the family, I also recall repeatedly saying, "But how selfish!" Ian didn't respond and he didn't argue with me. He was just quiet, perhaps being careful to keep his own inner struggles to himself. Or maybe he didn't want to defend this desperate soul because if he did, I might start questioning him. Or maybe his silence acknowledged the often accepted platitude in our society—the fallacy—that suicide is selfish; that it is someone else's problem; that it is something one does *to* their loved ones. I now realize that the only selfish one in that conversation was me.

Before April 9, I did think suicide was selfish. I thought it was for "other people"—people with obvious problems that surely their loved ones could have easily picked up on. I thought, "How sad for them." I thought, "Thank God that will never be me."

The questions swirl and swirl, and while immeasurable pain remains, I have achieved some peace in the realization that despite his inner turmoil, Ian knew how deeply he was loved, and we knew how deeply he loved us in return. It is that simple. To quiet the questions, I have found peace in this reality. To do something with my pain, however, I will shine a desperately needed spotlight on suicide awareness and prevention.

Getting the conversation started, without stigma, is critical. Suicide is currently the tenth leading cause of death in the United States. Ninety percent of those who end their lives suffer from a mental health condition, and often, as was the case with Ian, it is undiagnosed. Suicide is the second leading cause of death for people aged 10-24. Just as someone would never be ashamed of battling cancer, we should not be ashamed to battle depression or mental illness.

When Ian made the decision to end his life on Earth, he gave me a clarity about suicide that otherwise I never would have had. And with this gift comes the responsibility to speak and to act and to affect change. I know that we can grace this world with a wave of compassion, research, and advocacy to save others and to spare their families the absolute devastation that we as survivors know all too well. We can do this for our loved ones gone too soon and for ourselves. There is no more beautiful way to honor those we have lost. No more beautiful way to be sure that their suffering was not empty—that it was not meaningless. Indeed, it is their suffering that fuels us to act.

To anyone who is suffering, I say emphatically that you are not alone. You are part of the human experience. Perhaps those who end their lives are, as a friend said to me hours after Ian passed, too beautiful for this world, too sensitive for this world. Let us make it perfectly clear that we are looking out for you. Let's look for signs, known as co-morbidity factors, such as substance abuse, mental illnesses, eating disorders, and addictions. Let us look for these signs, and most of all let us ask the question: Are you ok? And particularly to those who suffer silently: You will never be a burden to me. You are so precious to us. You are not alone. There is no shame in being human. Most of all, let us remind them that in sharing their burden, they will be trusting us to help them, and that is a gift to all of us. //

My family and I are filled with endless gratitude to God for sharing such an incredible person as Ian with us. I shared this sentiment in my eulogy for Ian.

[youtube.com/watch?v=sTf0XL0tjPQ](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sTf0XL0tjPQ)

I also spoke in honor of Ian at one of the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention's (afsp.org) 350 Out of the Darkness Walks this past October. We raised funds in Ian's name to benefit the AFSP, and my family and I joined over 200,000 walkers around the country. Together, beginning by simply talking about suicide, it is our mission to end the epidemic that is suicide.

I am honored to promote THE Ride for Mental Health 2017—a charity bike ride in the beautiful Hudson Valley on June 24 and 25, 2017 with

rides of 25, 50, and 100 miles on both days. This is the first ride of its kind to benefit mental health; proceeds will go to McLean Hospital, a Harvard Medical School affiliate, for education, research, and treatment of mental illnesses including anxiety, borderline personality disorder, depression, eating disorders, and substance abuse. Please join us! ericssride.org

My family has created the Ian Prout Forever Memorial Fund, benefitting the AFSP, which will exist in perpetuity to honor Ian and to help others in need.

afsp.donordrive.com/campaign/IanProutForever

And finally, here is a vital, toll-free number: [National Suicide Prevention Lifeline](https://www.nationalsuicidepreventionlifeline.org)
1-800-273-TALK (8255)

Here

*Near the river,
Through the deep woods,
I feel your soul,
And it is good.*

*Racing, speeding,
A flash through the air,
I look for your spirit,
And it is there.*

*A vibrant sun beaming,
A single bird in swift flight,
These bring your smile
In crystal clear sight.*

*Your beauty, your goodness,
Your kindness beyond measure,
Now for you, dearest friend,
Only peace, only pleasure.*

*Through billions of years
And infinite stars,
You walked with us together,
How blessed we all are!*

*Do not have a fear,
Please always know,
Wherever our hearts wander,
You, too, will go.*

*The love you gave endlessly
We return back to you,
With profound thanks for a soul,
Perfect sky, dazzling blue.*

*I will walk forward,
I will have no fear.
Our love is eternal.
You are right here.*

APM for IUP
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