

Uncle Don

by Lauren McIver



Today I went to visit my uncle Don. I sat next to him and updated him on my life. I read him my acceptance letter to the Colorado School of Mines. I thanked him for his advice he gave many years ago, when he encouraged me to go for my dreams. I watched the trees blowing in the light breeze. I admired his gorgeous view of Pike's Peak. Finally, when I was getting ready to go, I kissed my hand and placed it on his headstone.

Starting in his early teens, my uncle struggled with drug abuse. At first it was pot and alcohol, and then it evolved to coke and harder drugs. After the death of his closest friend, he began to spiral downhill; drinking heavier and in greater quantities. He was able to quit drugs, yet the need for alcohol controlled him for the rest of his life.

My uncle played a major role in my childhood. He lived with us for many years. I was used to seeing him with a Bud can glued to his hand. I thought Bud to him was like Dr. Pepper to me. He taught me how to play poker and how to dance. One night he and I were out back as he smoked and talked about my future. He lit another cigarette and opened another beer and told me, "Follow your dreams, and don't follow in my footsteps." Then my dad did what was best for the family and made him leave; he couldn't be around us with his drinking problem. Uncle Don still came to visit on the holidays, but the Buds were replaced with cups of water. He still smoked but I never saw him drink. Things seemed to

be changing for the better.

On August 30, 2002, as I brushed my teeth, I overheard him talking to my mom in the living room. He said he needed to move back in. My mom said he could stay as long as he was clean. I remember hearing, "I've been trying and I haven't had a drink in days."

After school that day, Don, my sister Sarah, and I were hanging out in the kitchen when he fell to the floor and lay motionless. After a few seconds he made an awful noise and thumped his feet and banged his head on the floor. He turned blue in the face and foam came from his mouth. I hurried to help him but he looked at me with vacant eyes. I leapt to the phone and immediately dialed 911. I told them he was having a seizure. While I was doing this he managed to get up, although still seizing, and began to walk to the front door. I beat him there and tried to lock it, but got scared when he moved towards me. I ran out front and screamed for help. The paramedics found him a block away from the house and drove him back, where they monitored him until my mom got home. I was scared of him after the incident; avoiding him the whole night, until dinner. While we were dishing up our stroganoff, he dropped his bowl and began yet another withdrawal seizure. I was the only one in my family to witness both events. I can remember exactly how they went, what clothes everyone was wearing, what was on the TV, what food we ate, what I said, felt, imagined, feared, everything.

Even now, six years later, the sights are clear. This incident will remain with me forever. That night my dad wanted his youngest brother gone forever. Don was kicked out and we locked the windows and hoped he'd never return. He disappeared for a very long time after that. We tried to find him awhile later and send him to rehab. We held onto this hope that maybe we could still help him. My parents, being the only family of his in Colorado Springs, took days driving around downtown, showing pictures of him to store owners and soup kitchen workers. Finally after four days of searching, my dad found a belligerent Don walking

down Tejon Street holding two big cans of beer. After a night in detox, they drove him to the Harmony House in Estes Park. When we visited him, he took Sarah and me aside and apologized, knowing that of the family he'd hurt, we were the ones who suffered most. After he apologized I said the last words I ever remember saying to him, "I don't think I'll ever be able to forgive you."

The day following graduation he rode a bus to a halfway house in Phoenix. We heard from him occasionally, however never anything good. He went to jail for assault and was kicked out of three halfway houses. Don was drinking heavily again; then he stopped all contact. My uncle Jim flew down there to look for him; we tried everything to find him again. My grandma once said, "I'd like to know where my son is before I die."

Her wish was granted on February 22, 2006 when a detective called my house, telling us Don was found. He had passed out in an ally and a garbage man accidentally drove his truck over Don, killing him instantly. Even though my uncle died that day, it was the saddest and happiest day of my life. Though I was devastated to lose someone so close to me, I was happy he was finally at peace. My uncle Don was safe and not struggling with his demons anymore.

I know in my heart we did everything possible to help him; in the end his struggles were just too much. I've seen the effects of alcoholism destroy an amazing person and the relationships he had with others. I hope that by telling my story, it will help others realize the damage inflicted by alcohol abuse impacts much more than the drinker.

*The editors and staff of Alert Magazine wish to congratulate Lauren on winning the essay contest and encourage her to pursue her academic goals. We would also like to encourage future seniors to participate in our scholarship program. Sincerely,
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