

INTERVIEW

Interview with Elaine Canty - ABC Radio 3LO, Melbourne - 9th October, 1996

Time: 1.11

Elaine: Nine years ago, Steffie Wallace lost her eldest son as a result of a heroin overdose and to help her through her grief, she began to research the problems of addiction and addictive behaviour. She then wrote a story which is part fiction, but is really very much based on her own voyage of tragedy and discovery. Steffie, good afternoon to you.

Steffie: Hi, Elaine.

Elaine: How much did you know about your son's involvement with heroin before his death?

Steffie: Very little actually. I didn't find out until three months before he died and he told me at the time, he'd been on it for four years. I think when he told me, he was starting to run into trouble with it.

Elaine: Now, he was only twenty when he died.

Steffie: Yes.

Elaine: And you hadn't noticed any particular changes in his behaviour?

Steffie: No, not really. I think that made me angry with myself later because the type of changes that you notice, the flaking skin, the mood swings, the scratching and other physical factors, can also be confused with changes occurring in adolescence, so it's very hard to tell. Drug use, of course, is hidden as well. I think alcohol use is easier to pinpoint.

Elaine: So, in retrospect, you feel the signs were there, you just didn't pick them up?

Steffie: Yes, yes.

Elaine: What was his life like then? I mean, he was twenty then, so the four years that he'd had contact with heroin - what was he, a student, was he working, what was he doing?

Steffie: At sixteen, he seemed to be really happy, he was going to a technical school and hoping to do a trade course in woodwork, and the first six months, he was into weights and healthy living and seemed to have himself really together. The last six months of that year, we definitely noticed a change in him, very moody and courses dropping off at school, etc. I think that's when the heroin usage started and we found out later he was using drugs at school, and was obtaining them at school.

Elaine: What about his peer group?

Steffie: Not so obvious, really. There were a couple of friends who were definitely on the fringe that I think he was using with.

Elaine: Now, the character Dylan, in the book is based closely on your son and I suppose we could describe him as an advantaged boy, really, from a middle-class family. Why do you think he would have turned to drugs, and I suppose I'm talking about Dylan and your son as being interchangeable here?

Steffie: Right. I think it's very much an individual thing, the individual's propensity to escape through using drugs and alcohol. While I think you can have some family or social factors which are influential, basically, it's up to the individual who takes on whatever drugs or alcohol they're going to use to try and make their world look better. I think it was like that for him. As a child, he seemed to have problems communicating and seemed to keep things to himself, and I think the fact that there'd been a marriage breakdown may have contributed to his feelings. But, feelings of inadequacy, low self-esteem, these sort of things, I think, were

contributing factors to how he looked at himself, and decided that it was easier to be 'out of it' rather than 'in it'.

Elaine: How did you receive news of his death, how did you find out?

Steffie: I was totally devastated. We found out through friends who came round and informed us in the middle of the night before the police came, and that, at least, softened the blow a bit. But I had been deluded into thinking he was off heroin because we'd seen him two days before he died and he seemed to be very together, looking forward to a new job and really happy. And that made it worse in a way, because I found out later he'd gone off after seeing us, to score and being dissatisfied with what he got, got a new pack the next night, and that was the fatal dose. Apparently, it was very high grade and I think there were quite a few people who died in that same week from that batch of heroin.

Elaine: So was he alone when he died?

Steffie: Yes, he was. He wasn't living at home, he was in a house with other people.

Elaine: How did the friends know before you found out?

Steffie: One of the friends in the house took a phone call for him, went to find him, and found him on the floor?

Elaine: What did it do to your family, Steffie? That's one of the things that you really canvass in the book - I mean, the death of a child in any circumstances has a dreadful effect on any family, but when it's a death... I mean that kind of death, I suppose in a way is much worse.

Steffie: Well, it is. It's a very anti-social death. People back away from it and don't want to know about it and I think the situation hasn't really changed greatly in the nine years since Chris died. People still don't want to really know about it. It devastated the family. It reduced my son, the youngest, to being an only child, and I think that was very hard on him. But he has pulled his life together remarkably well and he now has a family of his own. With my husband, I think we're extremely fortunate in that it brought us closer together - in a lot of cases, it can drive people apart. I felt extremely sorry for my parents because he was the eldest grandchild and he had spent a lot of time with them as a small child.

Elaine: What did you find out when you looked into the problems of addiction and addictive behaviour, which helped you in some way to understand what had happened?

Steffie: I found that visiting rehabs and talking to people about their drug and alcohol use helped me a great deal. I should point out at this time that I also went into using alcohol, tranquilisers and a lot of cigarettes to block off my feelings of grief at the time, but to others, my drinking would have only looked like social drinking. Eventually, I myself had to seek help through the depression that I had encountered through blocking off my feelings, and I had to deal with that by giving up the substances and starting to look at the world as it was and work my way through the grieving process. So, I guess, when I talked to people in rehabs and saw what the extremes of addiction could do, that started to help me in terms of dealing with the problem of why Chris had died through sharing information. And I got hope from seeing other kids who were in recovery that were the same age as my son would have been when he died, so that sustained me, somehow.

Elaine: Steffie, your book was launched at a major drug conference in Sydney just last week. Now, obviously at the conference, the issue of drugs in schools was discussed - there were school principals amongst those taking part. How widespread is the problem in schools?

Steffie: I think it's extremely widespread, very hard to target because statistics are always hidden. But drugs will continue to be available to kids and I think the best we can do at this point in time is inform and educate. And I think it doesn't just need to be restricted to drug education, it needs to be life education - self-knowledge, self-awareness, the propensity, once again, for wanting to use drugs and alcohol

to escape. I think those aspects can be positive factors in helping people to understand *why* they're doing drugs, including alcohol.

Elaine: Now, in the book there are three main women characters, and I'm guessing that you're a compilation of all three. Would that be right?

Steffie: Yes.

Elaine: There's the mother of Dylan, then there's the artist, Marie, and then there's Dylan's cousin, Phoebe. Now the mother, Em, the character in the book. Is that the most accurate depiction of you?

Steffie: Emotionally, yes. All the emotional responses were absolutely as it happened and also, I guess, the fortunate side of that, having those experiences of my son after death gave me enormous hope to come to terms with his death and accept it. And the artistic side has come through in Marie. Also, I went back to school as a mature age student, so Phoebe has the confidence that I did not have at that time, so I made her into a character as well.

Elaine: You are an artist, a professional artist?

Steffie: Yes.

Elaine: And the cover of the book is one of your works and this is based on a photograph of your son.

Steffie: That's right.

Elaine: What does it do to your art, I mean, having that sort of a tragedy in your life. I mean, did you find your art was a sort of a solace?

Steffie: Not at the time. I didn't find much in the way of solace at all and that's why I created the book. If I'd just depicted my life, it would have been getting up in the morning, going to work, waiting for the day to be over, so I had to create more drama beyond this. I wasn't doing anything. The art came later and I suppose paradoxically, since my son died, my life has actually grown emotionally and spiritually and I've made my art into much more than I thought I ever could.

Elaine: But you hadn't been a writer before?

Steffie: No, only art reviews.

Elaine: So why did you choose to do this in a novel form, rather than just write a diary of your experiences? It's a work of, well, I suppose you could call it 'faction', because it is very autobiographical.

Steffie: Well, I suppose I needed to write down about my son's death, and that was precipitated last year when our grandson was born and it brought back all those memories of what it was like having a first child. So, I wrote it primarily for myself, and then these other characters started to grow around it because, as I said, if I'd just written it about me, there wasn't enough happening. People would have slashed their wrists and thought, what a depressing story! So, I wanted to make it a story of hope, of the ability to recover from tragedy, to put some optimism into the story. And I wrote it for myself and then I decided to publish it to try and help other people who'd been through that experience. And also to make other people aware who had never been through that experience. As I said, it's an anti-social death - most people don't want to know about it.

Elaine: Well, Steffie, that's another interesting thing, too - you've published the book yourself, but it's being sold through Dymocks in the city, and it was launched at a major drug conference last week. Obviously, there is a real market for this book.

Steffie: Well, when I say self-publishing, it was done through a company in Sydney, Bookpress, and they distribute through Dymocks, so while it's self-funded, the distribution is done through Dymocks shops. I've also put it on the Internet. I published it myself, because I sent it off to publishing companies, realised it was probably sitting on a lot of floors for a long time, and thought it really needed to be told, so it was good to do it myself and it's been a great experience, most fulfilling.

Elaine: A one-off, or are you thinking of the next book you're going to write?

Steffie: No, I am thinking of the next book I'm going to write. It is a bit of a bug, I think, once it gets to you, and I would like the next book to be much more cheerful!

Elaine: Thanks very much indeed for coming in, Steffie, and just before you go, any advice following your experience - and the research you've done after that - that you'd give to other families which are affected by drug addiction or, for that matter, an alcohol or gambling addiction?

Steffie: I would say, primarily, the most important thing is to seek help. First and foremost for yourself, professional help, and find out the best advice that you can to deal with the problem. You can't fix anyone else's problem, you can only fix your own. And there are two organisations here for families afflicted such as mine; they are, Keep Our Kids Alive and Families and Friends for Drug Law Reform.

Elaine: Thanks very much indeed, Steffie.

Steffie: Thanks Elaine.

Elaine: The book's called "The August Months", it's by Steffie Wallace and it's available at Dymocks.

Time: 1.23