

Death of a student

Mental illness drove David to the brink

Editor's note: This story was done in conjunction with Alfred Pagel's depth reporting class.

By Dorothy Pritchard
Senior Reporter

David Myers' funeral was sad. It was a sad day, a sad death. All deaths are sad, of course. But David's was particularly so. He was young and smart. Some people called him a genius. All that intelligence. All that potential. And then—suddenly, tragically—it was gone.

Sitting on top of David's coffin is a bouquet of three dozen red roses. The flowers rest neatly in the middle of the coffin and cascade down the sides. Pictures of David surround the coffin. In one photo, he's about 9 years old and is wearing a blue suit. In another, his face is filled with determination as he reaches up to slam a tennis ball back at an unseen opponent. Tiny snatches of life that ended at age 21.

The funeral home is beginning to fill up. The room is dimly lit, and it takes a minute for eyes to adjust after coming in from outside. Three lights shine on David's coffin. There are other lights in the room, most of them covered with dark yellow globes that dull the glare.

A middle-aged man surveys the coffin, swathed in its bright bouquets. The man sighs.

"It sure is a pretty setting," he says. "Ardent."

His wife doesn't respond.

"Are you okay?" the man asks.

"Mmmmm. I'm fine."

The woman reaches for a new tissue. Soon, pallbearers take their places in the front row, to the right of the coffin. The family sits to the left. David's coffin forms the third point to this triangle. It sits alone, symbolic perhaps, of his last few months.

But David wasn't really alone. His family cared for him... they loved him. He knew that. But he didn't have a lot of friends. He had trouble getting close to people. He was shy, extremely shy. His psychiatrist, Dr. Frank Menolascino, says David had a poor self image. He was afraid of friendships, says Dr. Menolascino, afraid of rejection. Those who knew him at Omaha Westside High School say they couldn't really relate to him. And David always felt he didn't really fit in. He had a hard time warming up to people, a hard time being sociable. But he liked people and he wanted to be liked.

"It's really kind of sad," Menolascino says, "because he'd try."

Derron Frederick, one of David's few close friends, starts a painstakingly slow trip to the podium. He has a walking cast on one foot. He leans heavily on a cane. Edging through the maze of bouquets surrounding the coffin, he bumps into a stack of programs. They float to the floor. He doesn't look up.

"I'm sorry," he mumbles.

The minister waves him on.

He sighs, clears his throat, then takes a deep breath.

"I was going to tell you a story about Dave. Something about Dave's dancing I think it was."

He pauses for a few seconds, then sighs again.

"I can see that it isn't going to be that easy."

It was never easy for David either. Most of the time, his father says, he was happy. About 98 percent of the time. But during that other 2 percent of the time, when David was desperately depressed, it was hell.

"It was like falling farther and farther into a black hole and just not being able to come out, to see the sky," he told his psychiatrist.

David worried about getting so depressed. He wondered if he would ever have a girlfriend or ever get married. Would he be a good husband? A good father? He knew he had a problem. And he learned, last summer, what caused it.

David had taken an internship in Washington, D.C., in the office of Sen. David Karnes. He lived by himself in an apartment. There were new, unfamiliar faces at the office. And a whole new city. The changes were frightening to David. They fanned all of his insecurities. The depression overwhelmed him, until finally, he took a handful of pills.

David called the ambulance himself. He was taken to George Washington University Hospital. Doctors there finally diagnosed what was wrong. David had been born with a chemical imbalance in his brain. The result, they told him, was a form of mental illness. David had a schizoid personality. David's only brother, Andy, says it was a happy time for David. He finally had the problems explained to him; he finally understood it.

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