
CHAPTER 1:

THE BELOVED SON

February 7, 2000 —
Raising Johnny by Laura

To introduce myself, Johnny's mother, I grew up in Colorado Springs, Colorado, on the grounds of the United States Air Force Academy (USAFA). My father was a colonel, had a Ph.D., and taught ethics and philosophy to the cadets. My mother was a psychologist and lecturer, and she provided Christian counseling services. They could both talk non-stop for weeks about their areas of expertise. Education, writing, and oratory were all important to them. It's not surprising I became a professional speaker and have authored books on the topics of productivity and performance. Now I'm the Founder & CEO of Johnny's Ambassadors, the 501(c)(3) nonprofit we established after Johnny's death (*JohnnysAmbassadors.org*).

I had a lovely childhood, protected in many ways from the outside world. As you'd expect, I grew up with a lot of structure and discipline. I was raised in the Catholic church. I was

outgoing and participated in student council, cheerleading, dance, and theater. I enjoyed schoolwork and focused heavily on my grades.

In high school in the mid-80s, a friend managed to get some weed. Usually, we were lucky if we could find some 3.2 beer and sneak down to the “beer tree.” We had to be sneaky, because if the police—or heaven forbid, our parents caught us with weed—we would all be in huge trouble. We all tried it since we wanted to know what it was like to get high. I didn’t like it at all; it made my head spin. My friends thought it would be funny to shine a strobe light in my eyes, and I became very dizzy. So basically, it wasn’t a good experience.

Tetrahydrocannabinol (THC) is the chemical in marijuana that makes you high. Back then, our “grass” contained a very low level of THC, about 2-4%. Today’s flower can be over 40% THC, and THC concentrates can be 90+% THC. Today’s narcotic-strength marijuana makes it a hard drug in a new class all on its own, as we’ll soon discuss in the research.

Admittedly, I didn’t know anything had changed since I was in high school because I haven’t used marijuana since then. Adolescent concentrate usage wasn’t even tracked by the Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment (CDPHE) until 2015. New-fangled, high-potency THC concentrates hit the market, and very quietly, marijuana changed. So, my experience with marijuana from high school was my perception going into parenthood. I just didn’t know. But I desperately want YOU to know.

Today’s teens perceive a lower level of risk if they get caught because it seems more acceptable since it’s legal. But teens are at a much greater risk due to the higher level of potency. I’m

writing this book for all the parents and grandparents who also smoked marijuana in their younger days and think, “Ah, what’s the big deal? It’s just pot. I did it too, and I turned out fine.” The media and Big Pot also target our youth with marketing messages, assuring them it’s medicinal, safe, natural, and legal. Of course, they need to addict their next generation of users, so the pot industry will not acknowledge the significant risks nor will they take responsibility for illegal use by our children. In turn, children tell their parents, “Everyone does it—it’s legal—it’s natural—it’s harmless.”

Nothing could be further from the truth. According to Dr. Christian Thurstone, Director of Behavioral Health at Denver Health, a professor of psychiatry at the University of Colorado School of Medicine and a member of Johnny’s Ambassadors Scientific Advisory Board, *no level of marijuana use is safe for children*. Why? Because their brains continue to develop into their mid-20s (for girls) and late-20s (for boys).

Here are some things you should know about my beliefs:

- ♦ I don’t believe people should go to jail for having some marijuana in their pockets.
- ♦ I am personally against the legalization of marijuana at any level and wouldn’t vote for it; however, I believe Americans use the ballot box to make controversial decisions.
- ♦ Where marijuana is legal, we need to put better guardrails in place and tighten regulatory loopholes to protect our youth.
- ♦ I believe if you can’t get alcohol and cigarettes until 21 years of age, you shouldn’t be able to get “medical” marijuana either.
- ♦ Marijuana can harm anyone at any age; however, adolescents, teens, and young adults are particularly vulnerable. At

Johnny's Ambassadors, we work hard to educate youth and parents as a primary prevention strategy.

Even pro-marijuana adults have told me they don't want kids using marijuana recreationally, so we can focus on *that* area of agreement.

Now to tell you about Johnny.

John Kenneth Stack was born in Highlands Ranch, Colorado, on February 7, 2000, at 9:19 a.m., and died on November 20, 2019, in Lone Tree, Colorado, at 10:32 p.m. Since he was born in early 2000, you'll be able to conveniently determine his age throughout this book. We called him Johnny to avoid confusion between him and my husband, who is also named John.

Johnny was a sweet, intelligent, happy, and handsome child. He was funny, sensitive, and creative. When he was a young boy, I constantly laughed at his antics. He was his momma's boy, and I was "his person."

Every night, he wanted me to read with him, pray with him, and sing lullabies while rubbing his back as he fell asleep. He had a favorite blanket and a little well-loved white-and-gray stuffed animal named Wolfie. He loved going to the zoo, collecting bugs, and petting dogs on all our walks. His favorite food was pizza, and his favorite treat was Krispy Kreme doughnuts. Even when he was 11 years old, I was still rubbing his back while praying and singing with him.

Johnny loved the ocean, video games, books, Legos, computers, math, and music (especially Billy Joel). In his lifetime, he participated in baseball, swimming, archery, soccer, basketball, cross country, track, karate, and guitar and piano lessons. He loved going to summer camps and even agreed to go to Cotillion to learn how to dance.

He had a spirit of service, a beautiful smile, and a kind heart. Johnny was highly intelligent, both intellectually and emotionally. Until he got sick, he was a loyal friend and a loving son. He was on the honor roll every semester, had a 4.0 GPA, and earned a scholarship to Colorado State University.

Johnny loved to travel. When I traveled to my speaking engagements, I would often pull one of the three kids out of school to spend private time together. Johnny and I enjoyed a memorable trip to Kansas City, where he ate his first huge Tomahawk steak, BBQ ribs, and pan-fried chicken. Johnny's favorite place in all the world was Hawaii. Each year, we would treat our family to a trip to one of the islands, using the mileage points I'd collected from traveling the previous year. Johnny and I used to feed the stray cats at the hotels. When we arrived, we would go to the grocery store and buy canned cat food. We would wander around finding cats and then leave food for them under the bushes or wherever they lived. Random, I know, but we enjoyed it.

Johnny really enjoyed history. He was interested in world history in general but especially American and Greek history. One year, our oldest child, Meagan, went to Exeter, England, for an international semester with Colorado State University. Because of the way the semesters were scheduled, she wouldn't return home until January, after Christmas. So, our whole family traveled to London and spent Christmas with her. Johnny and I especially loved the museums! Our favorite collection of medieval weapons and armor was in the Tower of London. Our poor family had to practically drag us out of there because Johnny and I hung out for hours, reading every single card in the displays.

Johnny and I liked to find ugly fruits and vegetables. Every time we went into a grocery store anywhere, we would find

a weird-looking item. We would look it up online, figure out how to cook it or otherwise prepare it, and eat it together. We had big laughs over how some of them tasted as bad as they looked.

I could spend the entire book telling you all about who he was before the marijuana; instead, I invite you to watch a six-minute video review of his life at *JohnnysAmbassadors.org/tribute*. Two dear friends, Brian Walter and Sylvie Di Giusto, created this tribute for me to show at his memorial service. Through pictures and videos, you'll gain a sense of what a wonderful person he was and get to know him a little since you likely didn't meet him.

You'll see that we are a regular suburban family and did regular family things. Johnny had a happy life and a family who loved him very much. Unfortunately, we live in Colorado which was the first state to legalize recreational marijuana in 2012. It became available in 2014 when Johnny was 14 years old.

February 7, 2000 — John's 2019 Eulogy: Raising Johnny

Dear family and friends, thank you for coming today. You honor Johnny and our whole family by being here.

We are here to celebrate the life of Johnny Stack and to say goodbye to a beloved son and wonderful person.

I'm Johnny's father, also John Stack. Johnny was the fifth John in the Stack family line. We all had different middle names, so we

didn't have to have a junior. My wife Laura and I are also parents to Meagan and James, and you will also hear from them today.

Laura and I named Johnny in honor of our fathers. Johnny was named John Kenneth for my father John, and Laura's father Kenneth. Johnny and his grandfather John became close when my dad had lived with us for a year and a half during his battle with cancer. He lost that battle in 2017, and we like to think that Dad was one of the first to welcome Johnny into heaven. They share a niche outside in the memorial garden, and we invite you to stop by following the service.

During this short time, I'd like to share some of my favorite memories about Johnny.

Johnny loved amusement parks. I remember Johnny being just tall enough by his hair sticking up to ride the fastest roller coaster at Six Flags. He was jump-up-and-down excited. As we exited the coaster, he said, "Let's go again!" And we did—repeatedly.

When he was around ten, we took a trip to Universal Studios in Orlando. Johnny, James, and I went to the park early before the ladies. We ran to be first on the twin coasters that race each other, which was then called the Dragon Challenge. As we exited the coaster, we discovered a secret shortcut to get back in line. So, we just kept going back on the ride, over and over again, maybe five or six times. I finally said, "I've had enough!" So, the boys let me sit it out, and they rode together another three or four times before they finally came off.

One of the things that I loved about Johnny was his sense of humor. I loved hearing him laugh, and he made us laugh. Our family had an Easter tradition that was passed down from my wife's father, Ken. After all the baskets and plastic eggs were found,

the children would gather around me in the kitchen. Laura would take out the basket of hard-boiled eggs that were colored the day before, and each child would take a turn cracking an egg on my head. I always thought at some point the kids would outgrow this tradition, but it still lives on to this day. Last year, my son James went first, and he cracked me just a little too hard for my liking. I said, “Wow, that was a bit rough! Can we dial this back a few notches?” Next up was Johnny, and he said, “Don’t worry, Dad!” He very gently cracked his egg, and it quickly became apparent something wasn’t quite right. While James distracted me, Johnny had switched his egg with a raw one from the fridge, and it was now squishing down the side of my head. Johnny thought that was funny, and so did everyone else. Except me.

Johnny loved the ocean. We could spend hours at the beach running into the waves, playing in the sand, or tossing a football. One special memory is the time we went snorkeling in Hanauma Bay on Oahu in Hawaii. We floated around for hours and saw countless varieties of fish. A few days before he died, Johnny talked about taking his new dog, Benji, to show him the ocean.

So, when we were discussing Johnny’s cremation, we knew right away that we wanted to keep some of Johnny’s ashes separate. They are in a special urn we will take to Hawaii and scatter the ashes in the ocean in a place he loved so much.

I loved my son, and I miss him. But I am encouraged by God’s holy word. Philippians 3:21 says, “Who, by the power that enables Him to bring everything under His control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like His glorious body.” We take comfort in knowing that God has the power to transform our bodies and keep us secure with Him. I truly believe God has Johnny, and we will see him again in heaven.

February 7, 2000 — James' 2019 Eulogy: Growing Up with Johnny

I'm James. I'm Johnny's brother. I have a lot of wonderful memories of my older brother and best friend and just wanted to share a few of those with you today.

I remember going on vacation with Johnny, and we would always argue over who was going to have to sleep on the couch and who had the bed. We would typically decide who got first pick by playing best out of seven games of rock-paper-scissors. Each game was more intense than the last.

We played a lot of video games together across the hall in our separate bedrooms, either alone or with his friends. He was consistently better than everyone else, so we got into a lot of spats because he usually beat me. Believe it or not, I actually miss those arguments with him. After we pretended to go to bed, we would get up again after Mom and Dad went to bed and keep playing.

Since Johnny and I were so close in age—16 months—my mom enrolled both of us in the same activities, so I always had a built-in buddy. From swim lessons to summer camps, from karate to hanging out on vacations, we were inseparable growing up. Just being with him and hanging out are big parts of my childhood memories with him. I miss that. As we got older, our interests shifted, so we didn't spend as much time together, but we were always close.

My brother was so much smarter than I am. I mean, he was a genius. I always looked up to him in school since he was a year older than me, so naturally, I was worried I wouldn't be able to

accomplish what he did. When I struggled with calculus, however, and don't tell my mom, he did my homework for me.

We weren't perfect siblings, but no one really is, and I loved him.

February 7, 2000 — Meagan's 2019 Eulogy: Growing Up with Johnny

I'm Meagan, Johnny's older sister. I loved being a family of five. I loved squeezing the five of us into one car, fighting as we got older about who got stuck with the middle seat. For some strange reason, I lost more and more of those fights as the boys grew older and bigger. But as their older sister, I loved watching Johnny and James grow up together, just 16 months apart. From their matching outfit days to the hours spent playing video games together in separate bedrooms, which I will never understand, my younger brothers brought a joy and pride to my life unlike any other.

In every moment of Johnny's precious life, there was a strength in this family that constantly left me in awe. Life with Johnny wasn't always the easiest, but it was always filled with love. Johnny's life taught me that mental health is not a choice. But love is a choice. Love is always present, even when it's not apparent. And I rest easy, knowing how much Johnny loved us and knowing how much he knew he was loved.

Every year, Mom would drag us out for our family photos. When we were younger, we would drive to the Toys-R-Us down the street and awkwardly cram into new poses every year until we

ran out of room on that tiny ledge. Finally, for all our sanity, I convinced her to move our photos to outdoor locations, and we went to Lake Dillon, Breckenridge, the Highlands Ranch Mansion, and most recently, right in our own backyard at Daniels Gate. What I treasure most about these photos each year aren't the photos themselves; it's the moments of connection I felt with the boys, rolling our eyes at the silliness of it all, but doing it anyway because we understood how much it meant to Mom.

Mom, the memories I have of the last few years of family photos are some of my favorite moments with Johnny (and honestly, some of the best selfies we've ever taken). Thank you for forcing those family photos on us all these years.

Beyond the photos were plenty of other memorable moments with Johnny taking the starring role. From getting bitten by the parrot after being told not to get too close, to causing an emergency stop on the road to Hana after a bit too much candy and one too many curves in the road, Johnny always kept us on our toes. I remember hours of playing Concentration around the campfire, always amazed and slightly jealous of Johnny's ability to consistently beat us all.

Johnny was by far the smartest of the three of us kids. I remember hours upon hours of him explaining his complex thoughts and innovations that I could never fully understand. All his ideas were rooted in his desire to make a difference in this world and help the people around him. One of my last experiences with Johnny sums up the heart he had for others. He was driving out to see my new house for the first time, and in typical Johnny fashion, he was running late. When he arrived almost an hour late, I asked him what had taken him so long. Apparently, he had found a homeless man freezing on the side

of the road and offered to drive him to a homeless shelter 20 minutes away to get out of the cold. Even after their arrival at the shelter, Johnny stayed with him in line until his housing was arranged before leaving to drive over to my place.

Johnny didn't always know how to help himself, yet he always found ways to help those around him. I will never fully understand my brother or many of the choices he made, but I'm proud of the man he was striving to be. And even though it hurts, I'm so thankful for the time we had with him and all the love, joy, and strength his life brought to our family. Thank you all for being here today to celebrate his life and support us during this time.

If you are struggling, please find the courage to reach out — you are loved, you are cherished, and you will be missed far more than you can ever imagine. Thank you.

May 10, 2009 — Mother's Day Poem by Johnny

Ten Things I Like About My Mother

- 1) When I am sad, she always tries to cheer me up and comfort me.
- 2) If I don't understand something on my homework, she explains it to me.
- 3) My mom loves me more than anyone (except James, Dad, and Meagan).
- 4) She likes to play Go Fish with me and my family.

- 5) My mom wants me to be safe. She says look both ways before crossing the street.
- 6) Every day after school, she asks me how my day was, and I tell her.
- 7) My mom is funny and has a great sense of humor.
- 8) She loves wildlife and going camping with our family.
- 9) She is a speaker and has won many rewards speaking.
- 10) My mom is a terrific parent and is very nice.

Happy Mother's Day 2009!

Love,

Johnny

January 10, 2010 — Baptism

Johnny was baptized *again* today. I used to think, "My kids would never be drug addicts because we raised them in the church, so they have a solid value system." To be sure, your child's faith is a protective factor, but it's not a guarantee he or she won't become a drug addict. Johnny was baptized as an infant at Cherry Hills Community Church in Highlands Ranch, Colorado. Then he prayed with John when he was a young boy and asked Jesus into his heart. He voluntarily asked to be baptized again when he was almost 10 years old.

Johnny was an active participant in the church, not passive. He sang in the kids' choir as a young boy. He attended youth group at church every week, even into high school. He participated in

the Awana and Bible Blast programs for many years, winning many trophies and awards for scripture memorization. He enjoyed attending Christian summer camps such as Super Kids Sports Camp at our church, Hume Lake in San Diego, and Idrahaje and Camp Timberline in the mountains. Johnny loved to help other people, particularly the homeless and underprivileged. We volunteered as a family to teach Sunday School for preschoolers for many years, cleaned up the community for our church's Love in Action Day, and delivered Thanksgiving meals to the less fortunate.

Raising your child to be a person of religious faith is a protective factor to be sure. But being a Godly person with great values will not keep your child from becoming addicted to marijuana. Johnny was still human and gave into human temptations, but that wasn't a reflection on how much he loved the Lord.