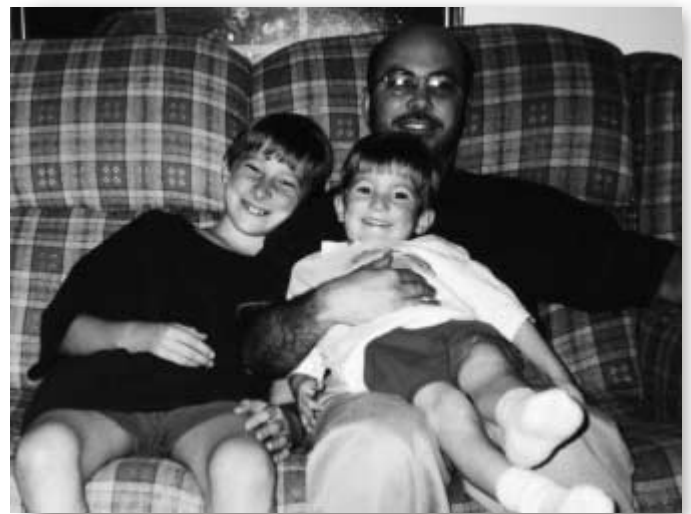


Suicide – A Misunderstood Tragedy



Rodney Robinson (above) in his office and (below) with his two sons, Jesse and Alex.

These articles are written by the family members of Mississippi lawyers lost to suicide. But for the Grace of God these stories could be about anyone of us affected with these illnesses. Rodney, Robert, and Portrait were real people, loving fathers, husbands, and lawyers. Often our culture focuses on “the suicide.” With these stories we honor their lives.

Rodney Robinson

I first met Rodney Robinson in 1989. I had just graduated from law school and started my first week of employment with the firm. Rodney had just finished his two-year clerkship with the United States Federal District Court, and, too, was beginning his first week with the firm. It was immediately clear on our first meeting that Rodney was incredibly bright, friendly, and would fit in quickly at the firm. We fast made friends, and my intuitions were correct.

In his first few years of practice, Rodney was honored by his peers on numerous occasions, having been elected President of the Harrison County Young Lawyers’ Association as well as to numerous terms of service on the Mississippi Young Lawyer’s board of directors. Rodney was a lawyer’s lawyer. He garnered the respect of his peers, as well as senior colleagues, for his commanding knowledge of the law. One of the attributes I admired most about Rodney as a lawyer was the kindness with which he practiced law – the civility with which he treated others in the profession while aggressively representing his client that made us all appear a bit kinder, gentler of a lot.

Rodney had three great loves. The love of family, the love of the law, and the love of friends. First and foremost, he loved his boys, Jesse and Alex. Despite working exhaustive hours, he was a devoted father who made spending quality time with the boys a priority in his life. He loved the law, and quickly became named a partner in the firm. His success in the practice was enviable, and many of us simply counted

ourselves lucky to have such a talented lawyer on hand to whom we could direct our questions. Finally, he loved his friends, and, for that, he had plenty to show. He was a proud member of the Olde Biloxi Marching Club, met his weekly lunch group at the Holiday Inn, and was always ready with his quick wit to orchestrate a prank on one of his deserving buddies.

In short, Rodney’s life appeared to be nothing short of a success story. He seemed to have it all – a loving family, a successful career as a respected lawyer, and countless friends.

Despite the beauty and successes in his life, Rodney died on December 26, 2001. In one fleeting moment, his gifts to the world vanished. Those left behind were left with lingering questions – What could have been so heavy on his mind? Why didn’t I see some sign that he was troubled? Didn’t he know how much we all loved him? Could I have said or done one thing that could have changed his mind? He never appeared to be down. He didn’t “look” depressed, and his voice was certainly upbeat during our conversation earlier during the day. The questions are still unanswered.

In over a year since his death, I have found myself contemplating how many of us are out there facing the same crippling obstacles as Rodney. Are there other lawyers with whom I have contact every day who appear content and happy with their successes, and yet contemplate the unimaginable when alone and things get quiet? If so, who are “they” and how do “we” help “them”? After watching more than one of my peers’ lives come to a premature end over the last year, I have come to the reality that “they” are “us”. Many of us

fit into the category of “those people” who struggle every day to find a non-destructive way to come off of a bad day, to be able to go to sleep at night, and to psyche ourselves up the next morning to face the pressures and demands of yet another day in our profession. All the while, we are trying desperately to balance our adequacies as spouses, parents, professionals and friends.

In a year, I have reached only one certainty. I miss Rodney’s laugh, his advice, and his presence in my life. I know that he, like so many of us do, felt burned out from time to time. I know that there were times that he, too, contemplated whether the pressures of the profession were enough to send him packing to some tropical island to wait tables, a six month construction stint working with his hands, or some other form of a short sabbatical from the practice. He, too, faced feelings of inadequacy, clients who, at times, appeared unappreciative, and the financial pressures of supporting himself and his family. In short, he is you and me.

My life is better for having known Rodney as a colleague and a dear friend. Hindsight is twenty-twenty, they say. Foresight, for me, is invaluable. Rodney, in his life, and death, taught me that none of us are invincible. Regardless of how strong we may appear, we all need a little help from time to time. We need to express and experience more kindness in our day to day lives, and we need to know that there is not one of us who is without value. Rodney taught me these lessons. He also taught me the value of children and family and love of the law. For those lessons, I am eternally grateful. For those lessons, Rodney’s life was not lived in vain. ■

On Any Given Day

Robert E. Taylor, Jr., better known to those who knew him as Robby, died December 3, 2002 at the age of 45. He was a wonderful man, husband, father, son, brother, uncle, nephew, friend and attorney. Robby was the quintessential Golden Eagle, having graduated from the University of Southern Mississippi with a degree in business administration in 1979. While there, he enjoyed his membership in Kappa Alpha Fraternity and his associations with his many friends. He was born and raised in and around the Hattiesburg area, attended Petal High School and was a graduate of Beeson Academy in Hattiesburg, Mississippi.

He attended and graduated from Mississippi College School of Law and was admitted to the Bar in 1983. During law school, he lived with one of his greatest friends from high school and college, Jeff Bradley, also from Hattiesburg. What a combination! If any two people ever had a blast going through law school, it was Robby and Jeff. Certainly they made it to class but they also managed to work in a good time while they were at it. Anyone associated with them or around them was always included in the fun. Sid's Cherokee will never be the same. At some point during law school it snowed and iced over; they thought it would be great fun to ride around and slide down hills in Jackson. I can remember spinning out on I-55 at the intersection with Woodrow Wilson "just for fun."

In law school, he met a girl who, as he liked to say, was "born and raised in the Delta". What he didn't like to say was that he met the girl during moot court appellate competition when he and Jeff got their socks beaten off by the girl and her partner. He also didn't like to say that she was the ultimate MSU Bulldog. The girl happened to be me. But we were both willing to overlook some things and married in 1983. In the natural course of things, during the twenty year marriage, two boys came along who are now 15 and 12.

Robby loved to hunt deer and fish. If you couldn't find him, he was either in a boat or out hunting or somewhere talking about one or the other.

Robby had the driest sense of humor on the planet and the best. It was the

twinkle in his eye that gave him away. And sometimes he couldn't control that tiny little grin with the dimple when he was pulling a prank or practical joke on someone. But that didn't happen very often. Once he persuaded Jeff and me to go to a new movie called *Poltergeist*. We had just seen *E. T.* and he promised it was just like that movie. He knew we both despised scary movies. We settled down in the theater and if you've ever seen it, you can imagine what happened. I was on one side and Jeff was on the other. We both stood up to leave at the same time. We both got a hand on the shoulder and a firm "sit down and shut up". When Robby and Jeff got back to their apartment, Jeff gave his television to the neighbors for a month. Needless to say, we never trusted his movie advice again.

But slowly, silently and quietly, corrosion began to creep into Robby's life and psyche. Several things over which he had no control happened in his life which affected him deeply.

He began the practice of law in Hattiesburg. Francis Zachary graciously presented him for swearing in before Chancellor Howard Patterson. He loved it so much. He tried his first case before Chancellor Glen Barlow and was so proud when he won. Robby was conscientious, concerned, ethical, caring and very, very good. He was one of those lawyers almost everyone liked.

Since his death, I have been told he was honorable; he was good at what he did; if he gave his word, you could take it to the bank and that he actually cared what happened to his clients. One client told me he was amazed Robby put the client's best interests before his own. He was certainly not a perfect lawyer but he did his best with everything he had. He worked hard and long on each case and cared about each client.

Above all else, Robby was a Christ-

ian. He was a member of the First United Methodist Church of Wiggins, Mississippi, where he taught Sunday school for many years and served in other capacities. Although he was raised in a predominately Baptist family and was the grandson of a Baptist minister, he joined the Methodist church with me at some point after our first son was born.

But slowly, silently and quietly, corrosion began to creep into Robby's life and psyche. Several things over which he had no control happened in his life which affected him deeply. One of those things was the suicide of his close friend and fellow attorney, Jeff Bradley. He was absolutely devastated by Jeff's needless death; so angry with Jeff; and so vehement that suicide was not a solution to any problem, no matter what. He hated suicide; he despised it; he did not and could not understand the act itself. He never recovered from the death of his friend; he saw the hurt that came to his children, family and friends; he knew the damage the death caused. He was fully aware of all the consequences of the suicide.

This is so important because six years later, Robby picked up a gun and ended his own life in the same way Jeff chose. He shot himself at the base of his neck so an open casket would be possible. What on earth caused this diametric change? As a result of events in his life that caused chemical changes in his brain, he became a victim of a disease called clinical depression. As I understand it, this disease is caused, or was in Robby's case, by a chemical imbalance in the brain. There are medications that can be given which correct this chemical imbalance. When Robby's symptoms began to manifest themselves, he willingly took the medication and immediately got results. His symptoms were primarily personality changes, long silences, and inability to sleep. However, due to the medication, he stabilized and returned to himself.

An incident occurred in our neighborhood. A large bomb blew up at a neighbor's home. Robby was the first one on the scene. Although he fainted at the sight of blood, when he arrived he found two children, one burned and one with severe, traumatic leg injuries, arm injuries and abdominal injuries to the extent his intestines were not contained. Robby knew the child could not live;

On Any Given Day

but the child was coherent and trying to get up. Robby had to make a choice. He sat and held that child although the child tried over and over to get up since he was unaware of his injuries and Robby told him to hang on, let's wait until the ambulance arrives. He talked to the child for fifteen minutes or so until the ambulance arrived. Only then did he leave, covered in blood. The child died shortly thereafter. Robby was in shock for hours afterward and never spoke of the incident with two exceptions. He told me he simply could not leave that child to die alone in the dirt. He also told the child's mother if she ever wanted to know her child's last words on this earth, he would share them with her. She never asked; she'll never know.

Then more things happened over which he had no control. There were members of the legal profession for whom he had the highest respect and esteem. He discovered to his horror and chagrin that they lacked morals, ethics and character and completely lost his respect for them. He also lost something



Robby Taylor at home.

of himself since he had believed in them so completely. As a result, the sickness returned once again; this time much stronger. Once again, he willingly accepted medication and became better

to some extent. He never fully returned to himself after that episode but he did experience some relief and recovery. He worked hard every day to be well.

Continued on next page

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On Any Given Day



Robbie with his wife, Lisa.

“He promised me, his father, his mother, and his sister, his only sibling, that he would not take his own life.”

Finally, Robby came to the conclusion he could not protect his family in the way a father and husband should. He began to think of himself as worthless and despicable. He decided on his own the medication wasn't working and stopped taking it. He saw himself as a failure because he believed that was the way some saw him. Due to the disease, his thought processes would not let him understand that the opinions of others are irrelevant. He began to sleep little, if at all. He stopped eating. He lost thirty-five pounds in five weeks. He prayed almost every minute of every day to God for help and understanding. He could not understand what was happening to him so he sought help from God. After about two weeks, he was put back on much stronger medication. More medication was added. Finally, there was no recourse except hospitalization, which he was adamantly against. However, we were left with no choice. I could not watch the man I loved, worked with and lived with suffer and stand by and do nothing. So his Dad and I took him to the hospital, where he reluctantly admitted himself. He was profoundly

clinically depressed at this point.

This sparkling, shining wonderful man, adored by his two sons, cherished by his parents, deeply loved by his sister and niece, and the person I leaned, depended and counted on to get through every day, wanted only to die. I can still see the sun shining on his hair as he walked across the street from our office to the post office, probably cooking up some devilry. Yet this same man reached a point at which all he wanted was to die. He was totally blind to how badly we needed him, how much he contributed to life, to the lives of others, to his community and to his profession.

What happened to the man who six years before was completely horrified and devastated by his friend's suicide? What happened to the man who was so angry with his friend because he had committed suicide, leaving two boys, a wife, parents, siblings, all of whom were profoundly grief stricken and affected in ways that words simply cannot express? What on earth happened?

At any rate, Robby was hospitalized four days and released by a psychiatrist on the Monday before Thanksgiving.

He promised me, his father, his mother, and his sister, his only sibling, that he would not take his own life. We had removed all weapons we could find.

Eight days later, the Tuesday after Thanksgiving, at 12:55 p.m., he killed himself in our law office.

His family does not want him remembered as a suicide, although that is how he died. We want him remembered as the vibrant, loving, caring person that he was. We want you to remember him as the man who would help others when no one else would and expect nothing in return. We want you to know he loved to fish; he loved to hunt; and yes, occasionally he liked to drink a beer or two. We want you to know he jumped up and down screaming with joy when USM won the NIT. We want you to know he had season tickets to USM basketball and football. We want you to know I could still make him mad by saying “I can still see the football going through the goal posts” even though the last USM v. MSU football game (won on a last play field goal by State in Starkville) was September 22, 1990.

We want you to know about the time in the dead of winter he ran yelling through our house in his swim suit, jumped in the pool in the shallow end and came out the ladder in the deep end without even getting his hair completely wet just to tickle the children. We want you to know about the time it snowed in Wiggins in 1993 and he taught the children to make snow angels. We want you to know he always left the lights on the Christmas tree on for Christmas Eve and was always up at ungodly hours with his trusty video camera to be sure and get the children seeing their Santa Claus. We want you to know he always ate leftovers either directly out of pots on the stove or containers from the refrigerator even though and probably because he knew it irritated his mother and me. We want you to know he was a Daddy who was willing to go to the New Orleans Zoo and Aquarium countless times just because the boys loved it. We want you to know he would meet a client at ten o'clock at night if it would help the client, even though he had worked all day and would be back at work probably no later than 6:00 or 6:30 in the morning the next day. We want you to know he always asked people seeking a

On Any Given Day

divorce to try counseling first. We want you to know he read the Bible every single day of his life. We want you to know his first concern was the health and well being of his wife and his second concern was that of his children. We want you to know he put himself last far too many times. We want you to know the last time he took a vacation was three years ago. We also want you to know he did not complain. We want you to know he treated the ladies in his office with respect and would not allow anyone to mistreat them.

We want you to know when a friend needed to be released from jail in the middle of the night; he was there. We want you to know that when a friend needed an affidavit signed to help him in some way, he was not only there, but got other friends to sign affidavits. He was a peacemaker and a gifted individual. We also want you to know he wasn't perfect. But he was a good man, an exceptional man and he did not deserve what happened to him. No, as he loved

to say, he wasn't on Law Review. But he didn't need to be. You don't have to be on Law Review to be a good lawyer and a fine man.

Depression is a disease
and it kills. It is no
different from ovarian
cancer or diabetes. Left
untreated or not properly
treated, it will kill.

We also want you to know that this could happen to you, a family member or a friend. Robby lost his friend Jeff to suicide on November 1, 1996. He never got over that loss. Depression is a dis-

ease and it kills. It is no different from ovarian cancer or diabetes. Left untreated or not properly treated, it will kill. There is no stigma attached to those who take chemotherapy or insulin; why should there be a stigma attached to those who take Prozac, Zoloft, Effexor or any of the other drugs that treat depression? Those who stigmatize patients who take these drugs are either ignorant or stupid.

Don't make the mistake of thinking this can't happen to you. Believe me, it can. Although through the last five weeks of his life he told me over and over he wanted to die and even pleaded with me to let him go, I never in my soul believed he would do it. But he finally convinced himself that his children, his parents, his sister, his wife and the world would be better off without him. So in a single moment he made an irrational decision that was irretrievable. And none of the survivors will ever get over it.

Continued on next page

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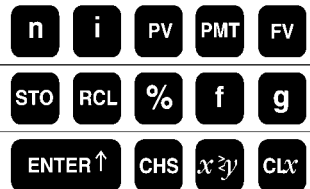
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Please don't ever stand in my shoes. Please don't ever stand in Robby's shoes. He wouldn't want you to. Don't ever make your spouse have to tell your children their mother or daddy is dead by their own hand. The look on their faces will be burned in that spouse's brain forever.

His oldest son got his letter in soccer at the soccer banquet just a while ago. He has seen his Daddy's first football letter and his Daddy's football jacket. His brother and I were there. As he got his framed letter with his name inscribed on it, his eyes met mine. And we both knew. The light has gone from our lives and we can't bring it back.

Depression kills. It can attack anyone, anytime with absolutely no warning. It may be genetic; it may not.

Lawyers are especially vulnerable because most people don't understand at all what we do. We are not magicians; most of us make our living helping others carry their burdens. Don't let the light go out of your life or the life of someone you know. It can happen to you or someone you care about... on any given day. ■

Portrait of a Mississippi Lawyer

I was attracted to him by his brilliant intellect, his charismatic personality, and his love of people. We spent twenty years together and ten years apart, bore two children, and experienced the extremes of joy and sadness before he took his own life. He was fifty and had been a solo practitioner for twenty-five years when he died. He constantly pondered solutions – what he called rabbits – to his clients' problems, but was unable to come up with a magical solution to his own life riddles.

His struggles intensified.
His depression formed a
veil over his day to day
responsibilities. Many
nights he could not sleep;
many days he could not
get out of bed. His home
life suffered tremendously.

He was a victim of his own sense of magic. He was a multi-talented extremist. As a youth, he attended church regularly, played the trumpet, participated in scouting, and ran track. He held part time jobs and could have majored in almost any subject. In college he was a political activist, a champion of justice and social causes. He considered going in to ministry and political science, and eventually chose law. As a lawyer, he could use his mind and his heart. With his gregarious personality, he was happiest practicing trial law. He often said that winning a court case was the greatest emotion known to man. He became a familiar figure in the legal community and a friend, mentor and confidant to

hundreds of clients, especially those who were down and out.

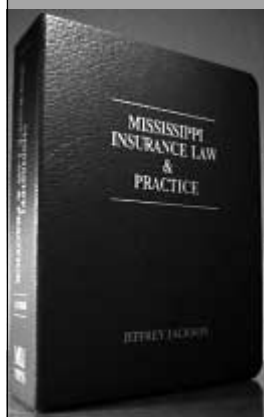
He was every bit the counselor. Many nights he would work after hours at Constantine's where he'd just as often be talking someone out of suicidal thoughts as negotiating a case. Early in his career, his enthusiasm and energy abounded. Doggedly, he worked to fulfill a visionary image of a successful lawyer. He felt pressure, not just to make a living, but to build an empire – to be king and to have it all.

His grandiosity was a set up for frustration. Over time his drinking increased, and his mood swings became more pronounced. At times he had difficulty concentrating. Never one to bother with details, he became more and more dependent on his partners and his staff. His inattention to detail and his procrastination caused problems. He moved from one practice to the next, always searching for the perfect situation to satisfy his restlessness.

His struggles intensified. His depression formed a veil over his day to day responsibilities. Many nights he could not sleep; many days he could not get out of bed. His home life suffered tremendously. As his unrealistic schemes failed to happen, problems resulted on all fronts. He sought treatment and medication for his depression, but never found what he needed to get to the root of his problems. He could not openly admit weakness, as such a confession would have destroyed his inflated idea of who he should be. He sought fixes and rabbits. Several caring people, who saw his suffering, confronted him, but he could not give up the protective mask he had created for himself.

In time his losses mounted. He suffered from physical problems, too. After our divorce, he had established strong ties to the children, but could not attain the home life he had wanted. As he was getting older, his children were growing up and away. Law practice was changing; many young lawyers with the energy he once had were emerging. Through relationships, trips, and toys, he tried to feel happy. Nothing satisfied for long. His family tried to ease the pain but were powerless over his blackness. His depression overcame him, and today many feel the void that losing this father, son, lawyer, relative, and friend has left. ■

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