Last Thursday, our son, brother, godson, nephew and cousin, Stephen Rose, fought courageously against symptoms of mental illness. In the last 12 hours of his life, he did all the things he was supposed to do to get help in a moment of crisis - made multiple calls to his care providers, to 911 and even went to the hospital. He had been experiencing symptoms for several years but was in a highly-respected treatment program that was working intimately with him. He was planning for his happiness, his dreams and his future. Nonetheless, in a sudden and surprising turn, Stephen lost the battle and passed from this world. But despite this loss, through the efforts he inspired in us, we will not lose the war.

We often have preconceived notions of what someone struggling with mental health issues looks like. Steve did not fit any of them. He was polite, athletic, good looking and highly intelligent. He was a Harvard graduate and achieved a GPA of 3.5 in his recently completed psychology masters program. He applied to law schools and was receiving acceptances and even full scholarships. He planned to visit one of his top law school campuses and had social events planned for the week. Steve struggled with, but was not defined by his mental health issues. While his affliction sought to isolate him, he fought to connect with others. Where anxiety would cripple most, Steve put on a brave face and did his best to reach out. He wasn't a tortured soul, crumbling under the weight of an impossible burden. He was a warrior, fighting an invisible and silent assailant in a battle to the death. His story — and the stories of many others struggling silently — must be told for the war to be won.

Steve’s legacy is one of love for his family and friends, kindness to all, deep thought and desire to connect with others despite the obstacles mental illness presented in his life. One of his favorite quotes was by Oliver Wendell Holmes, Sr.: “The mind, once stretched by a new idea, never regains its original dimensions.” This perfectly encapsulates how he was approaching his life and what he wished for others. Stephen sought to connect deeply with the ideas he engaged with as well as the people he met. The week before he passed, he started a blog for this exact purpose. We believe that even in death, his ideals can inspire others to share and connect—both those who are struggling silently to tell their story and connect with others, and for others who are not.

What happened to Stephen and our family is something that “happens to someone else.” Mental health issues exist at and beyond the fringe of acceptable conversation. In certain populations, like African American men and women, there is stigma. People are afraid to speak about it and those afflicted are even more afraid to seek help for fear of being ostracized. In populations of ambitious young people who are high achievers, the challenges are even more profound. This cannot be allowed to continue.

Mental health disorders should be better understood by young people in our society, as many of these disorders strike people in their teens and twenties. Families, schools, and communities need to be empowered to spot, understand, and embrace those who are struggling. And our failsafe systems to prevent a tragedy such as Stephen’s must be truly failsafe.

Our family will be inviting others to join us in sharing Steve’s story in the hopes of opening the conversation around mental health and eventually making an impact so that other families don’t have to go through the pain of losing a loved one. We will also focus on promoting the values that defined Stephen—kindness and sensitivity to others, inclusiveness, and open dialogue about ideas and ideals.

If you’re interested in building Steve’s legacy or hearing about the memorial service, leave your contact info at: http://bit.ly/stevecrose.

For those interested: Steve had just started a Tumblr at http://scrose.tumblr.com. We are probably going to make it a memorial and keep it alive.

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