

Rocky Mountain News

Massaro: Tragic end didn't dim 'bright star'

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Spencer-Thomas' brother was the one she looked up to, the one who could make her laugh until her sides hurt, the one who dared her to be great.

And then her brother, Carson J. Spencer, did something that broke her heart. He killed himself.

He had suffered from mental illness - bipolar disorder. And it finally overtook him.

"It wasn't a diagnosis he took seriously, nor did the rest of the world in the beginning because it was a milder form," she said.

In the summer of 2004, in a downward spiral of depression, he shoved family and friends aside and away.

"We had to watch all of that because he wouldn't let us in," she said. "When he crashed, we rushed in."

"We got him help. But he couldn't accept the help because he was so ashamed," she said.

He died Dec. 7, 2004.

"It happened around the time the tsunami hit Malaysia," Spencer-Thomas said. "It was like a tsunami for us. We had the feeling we were drowning. And when we came up, the landscape had changed. The whole world had changed. We had an early warning system. And it failed us."

Despite the grief, she and some of his friends decided they weren't going to just let their memories end.

In April 2005, they formed the Carson J. Spencer Foundation to head off suicides, specifically targeting working adults, mostly men, who are most successful at later-in-life suicides.

"There are fantastic programs for kids," Spencer-Thomas said. "But they end there."

Running suicide-prevention foundations is a big part of her job. She's also a professor at Regis University, teaching a couple of leadership classes. In addition, she's head of the Garrett Lee Smith Campus Suicide Prevention Grant, which offers a suicide-prevention program for college students and which is funded by a federal grant.

And she's a student as well.

She said no one in the foundation has nonprofit management experience. So she's getting a master's in it from Regis.

Spencer-Thomas, 40, grew up in Connecticut, went to Bowdoin College in Maine and came to the University of Denver for a doctorate in psychology.

"I'm a Coloradan in my soul," she said. "Within moments of getting off the plane, I knew this is where I was supposed to be."

When she's not teaching, bringing up her children or raising money for suicide-prevention, she jogs.

"Distance running is my therapy," she said. "Running is how I cope."

She said suicide crosses a lot of people's minds. But most don't cross the line and actually commit the act. In July, there will be a fund-raiser for the Carson J. Spencer Foundation, with live and silent auctions and a speech by Colorado first lady Jeannie Ritter. Information: www.CarsonJSpencer.org.

"He was a bright star," Spencer-Thomas said. "When they die out, their light goes on. That's why a star is part of our logo."

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