

What We've
Lost
9/18/20

From The Principal's Pen

On Friday morning, a year ago at this time, I was getting ready for school. It was picture day, so I was wearing a suit and tie. COVID had yet to strike the US, so my dad and I had a regularly scheduled breakfast in town at one of the few places that happened to be open before seven. As I was leaving, I could hear the sirens from the local fire department responding to an accident a few miles from my home. I thought about going to help, but I was in a suit and tie and wouldn't be much use in an emergency. My father-in-law, a volunteer with the department, drove out of our shared driveway in front of me headed to the station. I thought about calling and checking in with him, but he had his hands full driving and listening to others responding, so I decided against it. Twenty minutes later, I sat down for breakfast with my dad, having the normal Friday morning conversation about my week, politics, and sports when my phone rang. It was my wife, and all that she said was, "Dad's dead!"

On September 20th of last year, at around 6:15 in the morning, my Father-In-law was killed in a traffic accident while en route to help someone injured in another accident. Needless to say, that phone call and the events of that morning have entirely changed the trajectory of the last year of my life. There were people to care for in the immediate aftermath, a funeral to plan, and emotions to deal with. But after the first few weeks, the hustle and hurry settled, and I was left to deal with my own emotions.

For me, the grief process was a lot like a washing machine. For a while, I was flooded with one emotion and then with another. I experienced several anxiety attacks in the months that followed, and I distanced myself from others. At first, I was a bit embarrassed that I was a complete trainwreck on the inside. I tried to fake it and make everyone around me believe I was ok. The process of dealing with grief, trauma, and loss has not been easy. I was blessed with family and friends that I could trust, which allowed me to have a place to open up when I was finally ready.

I tell you all of this because there is still a significant stigma surrounding mental health in this country. Sometimes, it keeps us from asking for the help we need, and we pass this perspective on to our children. We are taught from an early age to keep these kinds of thoughts and emotions to ourselves.

In a few weeks, we hope to begin to have a large number of students back in our buildings for the first time in six months. Maybe their struggle isn't exactly like mine, but they will bring six months of stress, loneliness, and worry with them when they arrive. During this hiatus from onsite instruction, teachers, administrators, and other educational experts have had growing concerns about our

students' mental health. For many students, school was a place where they could experience safe relationships and be provided with the mental health services they needed. During our time apart, many of those supports have been missing.

One of the essential parts of our responsibility to the next generation is to build trusting relationships. I was fortunate to have people around me to talk with when I was struggling, and we need to see that every child has that same opportunity for connection. That connection can be with a parent, a grandparent, a teacher, or someone else in the community. Those relationships matter more now than ever. Giving our children the opportunity to open up about their struggles might be the key to their overall health and success. We must help them understand that we can't control what has happened to us, but we can control how we carry it as we move forward.