

» **IN DARKNESS,**

» BECKY LAVELLE WITH JENNY AND GRAHAM IN NOVEMBER 2007



LIGHT ONE CANDLE

Becky Lavelle faces the tragedy of her twin sister's death

By Timothy Carlson

Before the phone rang at 10 p.m. December 19, 2007 at Becky Gibbs Lavelle's home in California, there were no ominous premonitions, no hints of what was to come. In fact, the odds were incalculably good that the caller was only Becky's twin sister, Jenny, ringing to wish her goodnight. For the last 33 years, or since the two were born, the sisters had been inseparable, each other's best friends, and even though they now lived 2,000 miles apart—Becky in California, Jenny in Alabama—they talked by phone several times a day, the threads of their lives woven so tightly and lovingly together that the distance between them seemed inconsequential.

Jenny was the biggest fan of her sister's successful triathlon career, while Becky admired Jenny's creativity and adored her twin's newborn son, Graham. The Gibbs sisters were close, kind and generous people, given a head start in life by the love and support of their par-

COURTESY BECKY LAVELLE

ents, Bob and Sandy, who raised the twins and their brother Randy in Wayzata, Minnesota.

But the call that night wasn't Jenny—it was Jenny's husband, Chip Bankston, calling to tell his sister-in-law that his wife had shot her 7-week-old son with a handgun, then turned the 9-millimeter on herself. Their bodies had been discovered together, face up in the backyard of their home in the quiet suburb of Avondale outside of Birmingham. Bankston, a resident surgeon at a nearby hospital, found them after finishing work in the operating room. As standard protocol, the police led Chip away in handcuffs until investigators found several notes his wife had written that determined the deaths were a homicide-suicide.

"I could not process it," says Becky of that December phone call that changed her life. "I was in complete shock. I just remember saying, 'There is no way!'"

That night, Becky and her family began the long process of trying to understand why Jenny did what she did and how a mental illness called postpartum psychosis could lead a sister, wife and daughter into a silent maelstrom of personal torment so deep and hidden that nobody knew, not even her twin sister.

According to medical statistics, up to 85 percent of new mothers experience a mild form of postpartum syndrome informally known as the "baby blues," when a steep drop in hormone levels after a woman gives birth causes her to suffer sudden mood swings, crying for no apparent reason and feelings of loneliness, sadness and low self-esteem. The baby blues are considered normal and symptoms usually disappear within 10 days after delivery without any medical treatment.

More severe, however, is the illness known as postpartum depression, which can occur within several days to six months after delivery. Postpartum depression creates intense feelings of sadness, despair, anxiety and irritability that can leave even the most stable of new mothers unable to function.

At the very extreme end is a condition known as postpartum psychosis, which strikes approximately one in 1,000 new mothers. The onset of postpartum psychosis is usually quick and severe, and its symptoms include delusion, paranoia, hallucination, insomnia and episodes of bizarre behavior. Of those who suffer from postpartum psychosis, roughly

4 percent attempt to kill themselves and/or their infants. Medical journals say that any woman, regardless of her age, socioeconomic status or the number of children she has at home, is vulnerable.

"Before this tragedy happened, my sister was the opposite of anything remotely close to depression," says Becky from her California home. "She loved life and was always healthy, always smiling, always upbeat."

In fact, one of Jenny's neighbors, Johnny Bice, saw the mother strolling Graham earlier the day of the murder-suicide. "She was bubbly, really—you know how women are when they have new babies," Bice told *The Birmingham News*.

"The scary thing is that people who make up their minds to do this don't feel they can be helped and don't want to be stopped." —Brian Lavelle

When Jenny gave birth to Graham, her first child, Becky didn't visit her sister in the hospital—unfortunately, Graham's birth coincided with the Ironman world championship 70.3 in Clearwater, Florida, which Becky had already committed to racing. But the twin made up for lost time immediately after the November race. "I came to visit Jenny when he was 10 days old," says Becky. "He was just precious. His eyes were wide open and he loved to look around—he looked at the lights and our hands and he was really animated. He was just adorable."

After Becky returned home to California, Jenny frequently put Graham on the phone when she called. "He would coo and make little noises and probably the cutest little faces," says Becky. "He seemed aware of everything that was going on."

Under this guise of happiness, Becky and her husband, Brian, had no idea anything was wrong with Jenny. Unlike the majority of women who experience postpartum depression, Jenny was adept at hiding her feelings from everyone, including her husband, parents and the person dearest to her, her twin.



PAUL PHILLIPS

JENNY WAS BECKY'S BIGGEST FAN

After Jenny and Graham's deaths, it was a long month of grieving, sorrow and painful self-questioning for Becky and her family. At the end of January, the Gibbs family made a brave choice to create Jenny's Light, a foundation dedicated to educating the public on postpartum depression.

"When we found out how widespread postpartum depression is, it made us want to create this foundation to help," says Becky. "If the illness can strike someone so beautiful, kind and intelligent who had so much going for her, then it could happen to anyone."

"they are in peace and free of pain, and knowing that gives me the strength to keep going and the freedom to focus on triathlon." —Becky Lavelle

Brian says the genesis of a foundation came only after some serious soul searching. "We often talk about how easy it seems to look back and see that Jenny was crying and having trouble feeding," he says, "which is all easily attributable to being a new mom and getting no sleep. But how were we supposed to sense that she was going to take her life? Becky and her family struggled with that for weeks afterward—they felt guilty, that they should have talked to mental health experts, which was easy to see in retrospect."

"When we talked with Postpartum Support International," says Becky, "they told us there is a lot of national support but not on the local level. In the beginning, we want to focus Jenny's Light on local

areas in Birmingham, Minneapolis and San Jose [California] to see what is lacking in hospitals." The challenge, continues Becky, is that "health care officials don't want to scare moms about having babies. It's supposed to be one of the most joyful times. The possibility of postpartum depression and that you could be entering a very dark time emotionally is something most mothers resist considering. But it is treatable—there are psychiatrists, mental health professionals and support groups for new moms and fathers. It's crucial to make sure that no women try to go through this alone."

With all the sorrow, it wasn't until the end of February that Becky once again saw her triathlon career as something worthy of pursuing. "I definitely thought, 'What would she want me to do?'" says Becky of her sister. "I still talk to her everyday, and I have to believe she and her son are in a better place. Hopefully, they are in peace and free of pain, and knowing that gives me the strength to keep going and the freedom to focus on triathlon. Now, I know she would want me to do well."

Until recently, though, Becky still wasn't sure she wanted to race the U.S. Olympic Trials this April in Tuscaloosa, Alabama, so close to her sister's home in Avondale. But the chance to make the team would mark more than eight years of training, racing and dreaming for Becky. "The last two weeks, Becky has come around mentally," says Brian. "She draws some strength from her sister, and now she feels it's OK to train."

On top of Becky's laptop computer, there is a little strip of paper pasted from a fortune cookie that Brian insisted she keep. It reads, "Nothing is impossible."

And for Becky Lavelle, nothing could be more true. ☐

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