

## Dan Rullo

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**From:** EA 1996 Admin <ea1996admin@ea1996.com>  
**Sent:** Monday, August 10, 2015 12:16 PM  
**To:** EA 1996 Admin  
**Subject:** EA Class of 1996, Forever Incomplete

..and then all of the sudden, without warning, he was gone.

*[NOTE: This email departs from our normal message regarding the reunion effort. It wasn't all fun & laughter.]*

When **Steve Corey** left, our world was shaken like never before. There was a huge hole left in our school and in our hearts. For most of us, it was our first exposure that that type of “senseless” tragedy. We were just kids – LITTLE kids! And we were completely unprepared and ill equipped emotionally to process this type of incident. And on that horrible day, we all grew up a bit earlier than we should have.

There are lots of reasons why suicide is so toxic and traumatic for survivors, beyond the obvious. As social beings, we can deal with losing people suddenly for all sorts of “natural” reasons, and even some un-natural ones such as accidents, etc. Emotionally, we’re able to absorb those kinds of losses and rationalize them. But any time a loss is the result of an intentional act, it’s devastating. The taking of one’s own life, is a form of violence surpassed (in terms of psychological damage) only by inter-personal human aggression (person-on-person violence). Any time the causal factor of a loss is human in nature, the traumatic affects are always more profound and longer lasting. It takes years to build up a “tolerance” for those types of incidents, to the extent possible. That’s functionally referred to as “stress inoculation” and as kids, we were a long way from prepared to deal with this type of loss.

Before we talk about the day that Steve died, let me take you back to 5<sup>th</sup> grade in 1989. My family had just recently moved back from a 3-year absence from the district, and the state, when we lived in Connecticut. It’s no secret that I had, shall we say, a “rocky” childhood with questionable parenting. Apparently my mom and Steve’s mom knew each other and had mutual friends, then subsequently had a falling-out. Because of this, Steve and I developed a childhood rivalry and were constantly embattled in a pointless series of fights. We knew we weren’t supposed to get along, but neither one of us really knew why. We hurled insults back & forth about each other and our families. I can even recall a few physical encounters – one in the upstairs boy’s room at Westinghouse, and one at Ardmore Rolling Skating Rink, where punches were thrown on both sides. Eventually, the bitterness subsided and we grew to tolerate each other at least. We both matured a bit and thankfully, both started to think for ourselves.

Fast forward a couple of years... Steve and I disposed of our differences and became pretty good friends. From time to time we’d joke about the absurdity of our prior animosity and I think we both appreciated the experience of learning to resolve conflict. I gained a friend and so did he, and I believe we both understood the value of that evolutionary journey. Still though, we weren’t the best of friends and we hung around in different circles. But in our class, those lines were often blurred and even if you weren’t super close to someone, we were all pretty tight. I would soon come to regret every negative moment we shared and not becoming a better friend to Steve. I can’t help but think: *“Just maybe, I could have done something. Maybe I could have been that one influence that altered the path and changed his perception of abject hopelessness. Maybe I could have made a difference if I had positioned myself appropriately.”*

I remember, as I’m sure you do, where I was when I learned of Steve’s death – an apparent suicide. I was in my kitchen in Wall and Suzie Kerchner called me, in tears. I could barely understand her at first. It’s hard to predict how you might react to any kind of shocking news. But for me, I actually thought she was joking at first. Maybe I was blind or oblivious. Maybe I just wasn’t close enough to see it. But I just couldn’t have imagined that the possibility even existed, so my brain told me *“Nope, this isn’t possible, so it must be wrong.”* My mind had no frame of reference for this. So it defaulted to denial as an initial response. It would take 15+ years for me to learn about the cognitive functions that lead

to this type of reaction where normal processing is halted by a lack of experience with a given stimulus. In our trainings, we affectionately call this a “big fat OH SHIT moment” because you’re unable to adequately navigate through a new experience due to lack of conditioning. Couple that with extreme duress & pressure, and you essentially fall apart.

The next few days and weeks were absolutely horrible for all of us. There was a grief counselor on-site at the school and all of the adults around us walked on eggshells as they delicately tried to talk to us. We couldn’t have known it, but they were just as unprepared as we were and I’m sure they had no idea how to guide us. I remember one specific discussion with a teacher, privately after class, when they said something that hit the right button and made me break down. That wasn’t “supposed” to happen. We were big strong high school kids who knew it all and had outgrown emotions. We were completely in control, right? Well... bullshit! God reminded me that I was, after all, just a kid. And just like all of you, I needed to process this in a healthy way. Part of my reaction was due to the fact that Steve was a friend and a classmate. But it was also about regret and guilt associated with not getting along when we were younger.

What I remember most about those few weeks, is the eyes. I remember how everybody’s eyes looked – some in fixed dilation in a state of shock. All were moist with tears and a lot of them revealed a pain that I wouldn’t see again for a few years. I remember Steve’s cousin, Jason, as he had a 1000-yard stare, barely aware of anybody else around him. I remember Steve’s brother, Ben, heart broken and full of rage at the funeral home – his eyes were red and swollen. And I remember Steve’s eyes, closed forever as he rested before us at the viewing.

There are other haunting details that will be with me forever too. Bob Marley being played at the funeral home because Steve liked him. Most people think of summer time fun at a Caribbean beach when they hear Marley – not me. It is forever associated with this for me. Then there was the coming-together of schoolmates who would otherwise not make the time to acknowledge each other if it hadn’t been for the incident. And of course, I remember how it felt to see one of my peers in a state that didn’t even seem possible. I will always remember every detail. Some of it is even too graphic for this email.

For me, this was my first real exposure to death. Sure, I had some distant family members pass prior to that. But as I said, I had an unconventional family and I wasn’t close to anybody that had died up to this point. I’m sure that’s why it sticks with me so sharply to this day. There were other incidents in our school following this one that were equally tragic, but this was the first. And I think I had developed a hardened shell that kept me numb through the others that followed – until my dad died after graduation in 1996.

I don’t mean to trivialize or diminish the significance of other deaths in the EA community. I know Darlene’s family had their own heartbreak with Joe, and we all suffered through it with them. And I personally carried our dear friend, Casey to his final resting place when I served as a pallbearer at his funeral (Ask me and Jimmy about our trip to the Grand Canyon with Fitz someday). Theresa passed away when we were in school. Bonnie also passed away around the same time. And I know of at least one or two others. There have been far too many sad events that rocked our little community. I’m merely shining a spotlight on the one that awakened an awareness in me and that directly involved every member of our graduating class.

These days, I spend a lot of time in schools, conducting trainings for districts. And in those trainings, we talk a lot about warning signs and trigger points. It is geared towards a slightly different topic, but nonetheless, I can’t help but relate it to this incident sometimes. For some reason, perhaps because my wife is a teacher, school security and the well-being of kids has become a huge part of my life and a personal passion. It’s become sort of a life goal to try to help people head-off budding tragedies and to intervene when possible. I didn’t always treat people with the respect and dignity that they deserved. But I’m a work-progress and I’ve learned the value of friendship and reaching out.

I know... I’m a nostalgic, sentimental dude and you guys are probably sick of reading my emails about how great I think we were back in the day. But I really am fond of you all. And there’s not a single one of you, even ones that I may have had a conflict with at some point or those who I didn’t know very well, who couldn’t call me at 3am out of the clear blue and ask me to help out with something. I might not wake up until halfway to your house, but I’d be there. As dorky as it sounds, I still consider you all to be good friends and I often reflect on our time together. I’m grateful for the experience

of knowing every one of you and I hope we always cherish that experience because life has a way of making its fragility known from time to time.

To Steve and all of those who passed too early, rest in peace. Clearly, you are not forgotten, and I only wish you could have seen the full scale of your impact on us.

*Fama semper vivat*

**Dan Rullo**

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