

Let me tell you a little about Elizabeth and what led to her death.

Parents love their children and recognize their uniqueness and beauty. Let me tell you about my daughter, Elizabeth, and what led to her death.

Elizabeth was born on February 6, 1983 and died on March 15, 2004 at the age of twenty-one. She was run down by a train. The San Francisco Medical Examiner reported her death as a suicide and named Celexa (her S.S.R.I. antidepressant) as the other significant contributing factor causing her death. I believe she was murdered. You will see why as you read further.

Elizabeth led an extraordinary life.

Her mother, Kathleen, and I divorced before Liz was one year old. Though there were many difficulties, we both shared in Liz's upbringing and gave her much love.

Elizabeth was a happy, precocious, and verbose child. She often stunned adults with her skilled usage of language and the remarkable content of her conversation. Just before Liz's fourth birthday, she was stricken with Landau Kleffner Syndrome. This seizure disorder completely wiped out her ability to receive and express language. At first, she was all but lost in a world of seizures; unable to communicate. We struggled with communication through hand gestures and drawing. *Elizabeth and I had already developed a relationship with games involving drawing and there were times, even in the midst of this dilemma, that we truly enjoyed this communication.*

Elizabeth received highly specialized education for four years. She regained some language, but essentially missed out on normal education and socialization during these important formative years. When she was eight, Kathleen and I decided to risk brain surgery for Elizabeth.

The day after Elizabeth had her brain surgery, she got out of her hospital bed and walked around the ward, checking to see if the other patients were OK. This tender and loving behavior characterizes the essence of Elizabeth.

After surgery, her seizures ceased. Liz (Beth as she like to be called at that time) began to recover language skills. We took her out of the highly specialized educational environment and entered her in regular school with I.E.P. (individualized educational program) assistance. She had great teachers, continued to recover language, and, for the first time since the age of four, began the task of normal socialization.

Grade school went well. However, serious problems began to emerge in junior high. Changing classrooms and teachers, lockers, and mounting homework created much difficulty along with the traditional teenage stresses. Elizabeth was embarrassed at being periodically taken out of regular classes for I.E.P. assistance. She didn't like being singled out; she just wanted to fit in.

Elizabeth was cruelly ridiculed from the age of four to eight in regard to her L.K.S./language difficulties. She dreaded that the other junior high students would find out that she'd had BRAIN SURGERY and that she would be mocked again. Some students knew her from earlier after school child care services and taunted her. I can only imagine how painful and

frustrating this all was for her.

Elizabeth participated (often with much resistance) in various forms of individual and family counseling. She didn't want to talk about her brain surgery or her "fears of being found out", in therapy or at home. I broached the subject with her on a number of occasions, but she just didn't want to talk about it.

Elizabeth graduated from junior high school and received an achievement award. Kathleen and I were present in a crowded and noisy auditorium for the ceremony. When each student received their diploma there was much cheering. When the most popular students were called up, the auditorium went wild. *When Elizabeth was called up on stage, there was absolute silence (except from Kathleen and I). I nearly died. I prayed Elizabeth did not hear the silence. We were proud of her that day. She had on a beautiful dress and looked so pretty, though she was at an awkward preadolescent stage.*

Elizabeth was a beautiful child. In her mid-teens, she blossomed. She was remarkably beautiful, stunning.

High school was a disaster; boys, drugs, poor grades, teenage tantrums, severe resistance to I.E.P. assistance and counseling, and she began running away from home and school. In school, she tried to fit in; but could not. She hung out with the misfits. She ended up dropping out of a special high school two weeks before she would have graduated and ran away to live on the streets (to her and her friends, a very romantic life).

She nearly died of a heroin overdose and had minor run-ins with the law. For the next year, I dreaded that I would receive a call from the coroner reporting her death (*how ironic this fear would prove.*)

In May 2001, a miracle happened. I picked up Elizabeth from jail (some minor offense) and we rode off on my motorcycle to Henry Ohlhoff House, a recovery home for drugs and alcohol. She never used alcohol or illegal drugs again (how ironic that she died as the result of using a legal drug). She transitioned from the recovery home to Guerrero House, a transitional home, where she continued to get her life in order. She resumed counseling. She hooked up with a blind therapist (a woman who understood the world of disabilities) who she really connected with. Upon leaving the Guerrero House, she lived periodically with friends, Kathleen, myself, and finally in her own apartment.

Elizabeth was attending A.A. meetings and hooked up with a group of "recovering misfits" who became wonderful friends. **Elizabeth finally fit in.** They were part of the sober Punk/Goth world and truly supported each other, as well as had fun.

During this period, Elizabeth got a job at a secondhand clothing store. She already loved shopping and clothes. This job was heaven. She learned to use the cash register and much about the business. Sometimes Kathleen; sometimes Stephanie (my wife) and I would visit Elizabeth at work. She was aglow, self-esteem abound. She had a job she loved, her own money, new friends, and endless stories about the curious shoppers and homeless people in the San Francisco Mission District. This may have been the happiest period of her life.

Then something happened that may have opened up the cracks that Elizabeth eventually fell

through. **Crack #1:** She had changed counselors. Upon the well meaning advice of this social worker, Liz discovered that due to her disability, she was eligible to Social Security benefits. The benefits worked this way: she could received approximately \$800 a month. But, if she worked, she would lose a dollar in benefits for each dollar she earned. She would have to earn more than \$800 a month in order to realize her first dollar over the \$800 per month she would receive for not working (a dreadful system). She lost/quit (arranged to be fired) her job, though with an intention to go back to school and earn her G.E.D.

Just prior to losing her job comes **Crack #2:** On November 13, 2002, Liz begins a relationship with a new psychiatrist, Cynthia Benton, M.D. For health concerns Elizabeth asked to be taken off of the antidepressant, Serzone, which Liz had discovered had dangerous side effects. Benton prescribed Celexa, the drug that would in time kill Elizabeth. On January 6, 2003, Benton records state that Elizabeth was fired from her job. On January 13, 2003, Benton records that Elizabeth is "missing her job". Benton apparently did not see that relationship between Elizabeth's loss of job and "depression", and continued to drug her. (*What happened to behavior modification, like suggesting she get a new job?*)

Benton reports (after Elizabeth's death) that Liz "would go off and on Celexa on her own" (not at all advisable), yet she continued to prescribe. Benton's records indicate that she warned Elizabeth of the risks and benefits of Celexa, though Elizabeth's signature or initials are nowhere to be found regarding such warning. I told Benton that the San Francisco Medical Examiner had named Celexa as the significant other factor contributing to her death. Twice after this conversation, Benton told me that there is no evidence that Celexa can cause suicide and that she thought Celexa had nothing to do with Elizabeth's death. **What kind of warning could Benton have given to Elizabeth if she still saw no relationship between Celexa and suicide?** *Reports linking SSRI antidepressants to suicide had been out for ten years. Two years prior to Elizabeth's death, England and other European nations had taken some of the SSRI antidepressants off the market and had put severe suicide warnings on others. Apparently, Benton got all the information she "needed" from the makers of this drug, Forest Laboratories, Inc.*

In the Spring of 2003, Elizabeth became pregnant (unplanned) and chose life for her babies. Elizabeth had stopped using Celexa during her pregnancy. She arranged an open adoption and gave birth to healthy twins boys in December. During the Fall of 2003, she also successfully completed her G.E.D. (while pregnant). She was developing a relationship with her children and their adoptive parents. Liz was rightfully proud of her children and the open adoption she had arranged. She and I planned to visit her children in the near future. *This visit with Elizabeth and her children (my grandchildren) was never to occur. I cannot tell you how this pains me.*

Elizabeth took on the challenge of college at C.C.S.F. (where I teach art) in January 2004. She was having problems in one class, but was succeeding in English. It became a regular and delightful event when Elizabeth would quietly enter my classroom towards the end of my lessons. We would quietly smile at each other. When class was over, we would walk down the hallway towards my car, chatting. Our conversation would continue as drove her toward the BART station, where I would drop her off.

This was the happiest period of my life. I believed that Elizabeth was finally on a truly safe and constructive path. She was clean and sober, had earned her G.E.D., had two beautiful, healthy babies, and was in college with plans for a career in nursing or nutrition. She had a nice apartment of her own, a kitten named Raven, and a nice boyfriend. At this time, Kathleen was going

in for surgery and Elizabeth had made plans to stay with her while she recovered. Elizabeth told me she was looking forward to helping her mom, seeing it as an opportunity to return some of the help and nurturing she had received over the years from Kathleen. Though all appeared well for Elizabeth, she did not live long enough to be there for her mother's recovery.

Crack #2 widens on February 4, 2004, as Dr. Benton re-prescribes Celexa. Benton reports that Elizabeth had been off Celexa since mid-December, as Liz indicated that she had been "feeling tired and not getting around to taking it (Celexa)". Benton reports: "feeling OK at first, more depressed now". Two days before Elizabeth's 21st birthday, Benton's "gift" is re-prescribing Celexa (with two refills) which would kill Liz in just forty-one days.

According to Benton's records, Elizabeth does not show for her February 16th appointment. Benton indicated that she spoke on the phone with Liz on the 17th "spoke on phone briefly. Forgot Apt. Doing well, back on Celexa, f/u 1 mo."

On March 3rd, Elizabeth walked quietly into my classroom. We smiled. We walked down the hall and out to my car. She had come to school that sunny morning without a coat. By afternoon it lightly raining. I gave her a sweatshirt I had in the car (it felt good to have this for my child). We drove near the BART station. This time, I parked and we chatted a while. Then I told her I wanted to get going (to surf). We kissed and said "I love you" to each other. I watched her cross the street and head toward the station. I drove away **never to see Liz again.**

On March 10th, Liz called me in the evening. Her voice was hoarse as she asked me a question about her English homework. I answered and then we chatted briefly. She told me she had caught the flu while caring for her boyfriend (who had the flu a week earlier). I joked, "Isn't love something?" We laughed, then said, "Good-bye. I love you." It was a pleasant loving conversation. **Little did I know that was to be our last conversation.** (*I still have one earlier message from Elizabeth on my answering machine. Her voice was musical.*)

March 15th was a particularly warm sunny day. When I finished teaching, I drove home to check my computer and go surfing. While at the computer, the phone rang. I answered hello to a solemn voice: "Is this Mr. James Torlakson, father of Elizabeth Torlakson?" I said yes. "This is the San Francisco Medical Examiner. I have bad news for you..." I dropped the phone, went to my knees, and cried hysterically. No! No! No! Somehow I knew what he was going to say. A minute or more later, I picked up the phone again. He told me that my daughter had died that morning. He was kind. I was devastated beyond comprehension. The bottom had just dropped out of my world.

The next days were like a strange and awful dream. I'm sure I was in shock. I was advised not to view Elizabeth's battered body. I didn't. I made the necessary funeral arrangements. Kathleen arranged a beautiful Mass. The story of the final days of Elizabeth's life and death unraveled over the next weeks.

Jason, Liz's boyfriend, is the sole source. Jason said that Elizabeth had run out of Celexa about a week before she died. She was sick in bed with the flu and didn't refill. (*There is no reason to think that Elizabeth had any idea of her pending doom as Benton gave her no real picture of the risks. Benton, with extreme irresponsibility, had given Liz authorization for "2 refills, three months worth of dangerous drugs to a patient with a history of going off and on them on her own?".*) On Sunday, March 14th, Elizabeth woke up overtly suicidal—repeatedly stating she was going to kill herself. Ja-

son had never seen her like this and obviously didn't know what to do.

Crack #3: Jason did not call 911, did not call Suicide Prevention, did not call me, did not call Kathleen, and did not call any responsible adult. That afternoon, as Liz's suicidal remarks continued, he did call a very young and ignorant mutual girlfriend. She told Jason he must refill the prescription. Jason later related that he had threatened Elizabeth that he would call Kathleen if she wouldn't refill the prescription (a pathetic tactic).

Crack #4: That evening Elizabeth sent Jason to refill the prescription. The Walgreens pharmacist would not. Jason returns empty handed and persuades Elizabeth to come with him. Jason related that Elizabeth was completely "out of it" and they both got strange looks from the pharmacist. Because they had forgotten her medical card or the bottle, the pharmacist turns them away. They return again with the proper material, again get suspicious looks, and the pharmacist refills the prescription. **The Walgreens pharmacist failed to respond to a suspicious circumstance, a medical emergency, and sold dangerous drugs to my daughter. No consultation—just business as usual. Elizabeth would die in about twelve hours.**

At about 9:00 or 10:00 PM, Jason helps administer Elizabeth's Celexa. They were sleeping together. He says that Elizabeth told him she woke up at 4:00 AM and laid awake in bed. Apparently she took another dose that morning before they left her apartment (again, Benton knew this was her MO, nearly doubling her dose). Jason said Liz appeared to be OK (?). **Crack #4 widens:** They went to a bank, then parted, Jason to work on his bike and Elizabeth down into the BART station on her way to school. *Why Jason let her go off on her own after being seriously suicidal the day before I'll never know. He, maybe he was "being the man" preventing anyone from intervening. Jason alone held my daughter's life in his hands. He let Elizabeth slip right through.*

I have obtained some of the BART surveillance video stills showing Elizabeth making her way through the turnstile and walking down the platform toward a tunnel. She apparently worked her way past an insecure gate, walked into the tunnel, and moments later was smashed by an oncoming train.

BART refuses to release all of the photographs (though I have requested them all) . They might reveal something. They position of her body on the tracks might indicate if she purposely walked in front of the train, if she attempted to avoid the train, or some other factor. BART seems more concerned about its self image and possible liability than in granting my request. I hope they reconsider.

It seems that I will never know if and when Elizabeth decided to kill herself (consciously or unconsciously). She left no note. I believe that Celexa induced and inspired her death. The San Francisco Medical Examiner believed Celexa was directly involved.

Crack #5: Ironically, persistent parents (whose children had died of S.S.R.I. antidepressant suicides in previous years) finally managed to get this tragic problem to the floor of the United States Congress on March 16th, the day after Elizabeth's life was taken. The FDA knew of the profound number of S.S.R.I. suicides and refused to take action. Daniel Troy, then head of the FDA suppressed Dr. Mosholder's (an FDA member) report which concurred with European finds, directly linking the antidepressants with suicide. *(Daniel Troy was President Bush's first major appointment. Daniel Troy was previously employed by pharmaceutical corporations to represent the drug companies against the public—what an evil choice).* Again, England had taken steps to take

some of the S.S.R.I. drugs off the market and issue serious warnings about SSRI suicides **two years earlier**. The FDA (*in the pockets of the drug companies*) failed to warn the American public and doctors about these extreme dangers. Following this Congressional exposure, the FDA concluded that the suicide issue needed more study and took no action. **They did not want to alarm the public**, interfere with corporate profits.

Crack #6 is the most grievous and wicked. The drug companies knew of the suicide problem all along. They suppressed clinical trials that revealed this travesty so as not to interfere with their huge profits. There has been serious concern about S.S.R.I. antidepressant suicides (and homicides) for more than **ten years**.

Untold billions of dollars have been made; thousands of innocent lives have been taken.

In 2004, Forest Laboratories, Inc. (makers of Celexa) netted \$2,680,274,000.

In 2004, Elizabeth's life was murderously taken and all who knew and loved her lost in a manner that cannot be measured adequately in money.

I hold Forest Laboratories, Inc. accountable for the murder of my daughter, Elizabeth. Her murder was premeditated. To this drug company, Elizabeth was just a number, an annoying statistic that could be overlooked in the pursuit of ungodly profit. Her murder was impersonal, but calculated.

If a person threw a bomb in a crowded theatre, they would know that people would be killed. They wouldn't know exactly who, but they knew people would die as a result of their action. This is the kind of impersonal murder I charge Forest Laboratories, Inc. with.

Enough about Elizabeth's death...

Elizabeth loved nature, animals, plants, people, camping, hiking, shopping, fashion, art (both Kathleen and I are artists), her A.A. friends, her children and their adoptive parents, her parents, her brothers and sister, her relatives, her cat, amusement parks, scary rides, laughing, good nutrition, helping others (especially homeless people), music, and so much more. She packed a lot of experience into her twenty-one years. She overcame many obstacles and displayed courage and kindness throughout her life. Elizabeth was and is my hero, my teacher, my friend, and my precious daughter. It was and is a great honor to be her father.

When Elizabeth was nine months old (preverbal), I took her out in our garden to show her the beauty of a blooming rose. I tried to attract her attention to the flower, but she kept a fixed gaze in the other direction. In a short while, I decided to see what had captured her attention. She was staring at a milkweed plant whose deep green leaves and milky veins were glistening in the sun. I, her father and an artist who knew beauty when I saw it, was humbled. The weed was every bit as beautiful as the rose. I was deeply moved and recognized that Elizabeth was going to be my teacher. She taught many great lessons and is still teaching.

Her greatest lesson was teaching me to love unconditionally. I loved her when her body was forming inside of Kathleen, at the moment of her birth, and this love grew throughout our lives together. This love is still growing as I learn that love is eternal.

Though Liz was overtly beautiful as a child and an adult, she never judged people by their appearances, financial status, race, or creed. She was the least prejudiced person I have known.

Two days after Elizabeth passed, her voice came to me. She said (very simply), “Dad, don’t judge me ... and don’t judge others.” As you may have guessed, I am still working on the “don’t judge others” part. Perhaps my judgment is not misplaced if it serves to bring about greater awareness and loving change. My intentions are to save lives and further grief.

I miss Elizabeth more than words can say. Her beauty was a mere reflection of her inner self. It was always with curious anticipation that I looked forward to seeing Liz. Her changing and creative sense of fashion was a joy to behold when she was a small child and throughout her life. She was a true beauty without makeup, but it was amazing what playful and stunning looks she concocted when she made herself up. I never knew what color(s) her hair would be when she came to visit. I was curious to see her self-designed tattoos progress and teased her about how they would look when she was old and wrinkly.

I was so curious and hopeful in regard to her future and what she would do with her life. Alas, her life ended at twenty-one and so many dreams and hopes were smashed. The cup that held her life was not half empty—it overflowed.

Those of you knew Elizabeth, are already familiar with much of what I have written here. If you didn’t know Elizabeth, I hope I have given you a glimpse of what an extraordinary person she was.

If you would like to know more, please visit www.jamestorlakson.com or www.elizabethtorlakson.org .

If you would like to know more about the dangers of S.S.R.I. antidepressants and other tragic losses, please visit www.drugawareness.org . If you know someone taking these drugs please warn them.

If you or someone you know is contemplating suicide, contact Suicide Prevention. Help and answers are readily available.

Peace and love,
James Torlakson, Elizabeth’s father