

## **Audio Transcript for Episode 607: "Suicide Loss, Sibling Grief, and Silencing Shame"**

*Please note: This transcript has been lightly edited to remove filler words or sounds.*

### **AUSTIN ANDREW**

My sister died. And I was just not taking care of myself in the best way at the time. Work as hard as I can, work as hard as my body will let me, as many hours. Go home, sleep, eat, repeat. And that was. That was life. And I was like, Well, my sister has taken her life and I've stopped living entirely. And so on her birthday, I went out for a hike. I was like, I'm going to go for a hike. And then I just let all the emotions out. I was out on my own hiking, it was snowy, there was wind. I was in Montana. And I would just, like I said, throwing fists at the sky. I was angry. But I was allowing myself to feel again.

[music playing]

### **CHAD MOSES**

You're listening to the "To Write Love on Her Arms" podcast, a show about mental health and the things that make us human. I'm your host Chad Moses, and in each episode, we'll be talking about the things that can often feel hard to talk about, like depression, addiction, self-injury, and suicide. We'll be sharing stories and exploring big themes like hope, healing, and recovery. If any of the topics we discuss, or the stories we share, feel too heavy for you, know that it's OK to pause, to restart, or to stop altogether. As we discover new stories, we hope to remind you that your story is important.

[music playing]

### **CHAD**

It's September. A month that gives way to TWLOHA's biggest, most prominent campaign of the calendar year: Suicide Prevention Month. The truth is that we lose someone to suicide every 45 seconds. It impacts every community on the planet. Suicide isn't a bad word. We can and should talk about it because talking about it is how we quell stigma and silence the shame that has latched on to it for ages. Suicide has impacted and will impact so many. There are those we've lost to suicide, there are those who are thinking about suicide, there are those who attempt and survive, there are those who are grieving because of suicide, and there are those who are worried about someone they love considering it. We believe we all have a role to play in working to prevent these tragedies. This doesn't mean we can save everyone, this doesn't mean those still living should feel guilty or that they could have done something more. What we don't want though, is for people to think that nothing can be done or that this work only takes place in moments of crisis rather than in our everyday lives. We don't want people to believe that the world is better without them. So please receive this message loud and clear: The world is not better without you.

One piece of the puzzle that is suicide prevention is giving space for those that have been directly impacted by this epidemic, and that includes people who have lost those they love to suicide. Within the grief of losing someone, there are waves of guilt and waves of shame. Those continuing on in the aftermath are left with questions and often little to no answers. They might wonder why, they might ask what they could have done differently, and they might think it's wrong for them to smile or laugh or hope ever again.

There is a common thread between the two individuals joining us on today's episode. They have both lost sisters to suicide and they are both wanting and willing to exist in this awkward and vulnerable space for the sake of healing and hope and help. While they go about it in different ways, their goals are similar.

Our two guests are none other than Billy Dwyer and Austin Andrew, and we are eager to introduce you to them.

Billy Dwyer is a Licensed Social Worker who works as a Legislative Assistant for his personal Member of Congress in Washington, D.C. As a suicide loss survivor, he is passionate about sharing his sister's story and advocating for headache disorders. Billy is a proud TWLOHA intern alum and has helped represent the organization at events across the US. Beyond professional work, Billy enjoys being outside, drinking coffee, cooking, and lounging by the nearest body of water.

Austin Andrew has studied outdoor adventure leadership and when he is not guiding, he can typically be found (or rather *not* found) outside riding his bike or climbing some mountain. Austin is the founder of a non-profit called We Shall Continue with Style, and is an ambassador for Kona Bikes and the Maxx G Foundation. Austin shares his story of living with grief after loss and works to support others through their own grief journeys. At the present moment, he is cycling through the Americas on a bike.

And as for me, I'm your host, Chad Moses. I'm so glad you're here. Let's get going.

[music playing]

**CHAD**

Here we are, in the midst of Suicide Prevention Month in the states and really honored to have some candid conversation here with my friends, Billy and Austin. So first, Billy dude, so good to see you again. It's been a minute and just so thrilled to have you here. Austin, where in all of the Americas are you right now?

**AUSTIN**

The southern part. I am currently near Bariloche, like a ski, a ski resort kind of area of Argentina.

**CHAD**

It's wintertime right there, right?

**AUSTIN**

It's very much winter. Yeah.

**CHAD**

Like how cold are we talking?

**AUSTIN**

I've spent a couple of nights in the snow on my bike. Right now it is, has a heat wave coming through, so I think it's raining outside at the moment. So we're in the 40s Fahrenheit and closer to zero in Celsius.

**CHAD**

How good are you at now translating kilometers to miles or centigrade to Fahrenheit now?

**AUSTIN**

The amount of math I do riding my bike every day, I should be faster at it. But luckily point six is easy to kind of calculate into the miles per hour, kilometers per hour. So I'm always like, okay, it was 200 kilometers. We got point six. So we have 12- 120. Yeah, yeah, lots of math being done on the bike. Lots of math, but no better than when I started, but I'm getting quicker at the math.

**CHAD**

There you go. Billy, how was your math in DC? That's still holding up good?

**BILLY DWYER**

Math isn't great. But you know, I read quite a bit. I talk to folks a bit. Yeah, but, but my mom always says that we don't really use a lot of math in adulthood. And I kind of stick to that too.

**CHAD**

Amen, Mrs. Dwyer. Nailed it. Yeah, y'all. Well, again, thank you so much for joining us in your respective parts of the world. We just heard a little bit about your intros that that y'all are both navigating this world without someone that that we wish was here- that that should be here, There's a common thread between the two of you, that's really going to be kind of the the goalposts for this conversation, that thread being the loss of a loved one to suicide, and most specifically a loss of a sister to suicide. So I'd like to hear from both of you just a little bit about your perspective sisters and how suicide became intertwined with with all collective stories, Billy, if you want to want to start?

**BILLY**

I am the youngest child in my family, I had two older sisters, my sister, Melissa was five years older than me, and I think my sister Erin was two or three older than Melissa, so probably like seven, eight. Yeah, and my sisters journey kind of started, at least my recollection of it was, as I got into my high school years, obviously, those are pretty formative years, you know, working to find your own identity, trying to fit in, make friends, pursue, you know, education, sports, whatever it may be. And around that time, my sister Melissa struggled more and more with chronic migraine. And by the time I was kind of aware of it was when I was in high school, and I remember long nights with my mom, you know, going to the nearest Urgent Care Hospital taking trips outside of Illinois to try to find how to specialist going to, you know, neurologist clinics throughout the country. And I just sort of saw my sister's life deteriorate kind of right in front of my eyes. And just about a week or two after I graduated high school, my sister died by suicide in 2013. And that kind of brought me into the TWLOHA world sort of ignited the fire for mental health advocacy, headache disorders advocacy and ultimately led me to pursue working in the world of policy and trying to make a difference for folks. And yeah, my sister, I mean, when she wasn't sick, she was kind of the life of the party. Super spontaneous, incredibly fun. I have a lot of fond memories of the time when hacking each other's social media accounts, if you left without, you know, getting rid of your password and leaving silly messages to one another or her coming into my room and asking me you know, how her outfit looked or you know, what was going on with her world, she'd like to just kind of annoy me, me being the younger brother with two older sisters. You know, I kind of ribbed them back and sort of was the golden child, as they like to say, because, you know, obviously the youngest and sort of the mama's boy. But yeah, that's a little bit about me.

**AUSTIN**

I'm the middle child of three. And my sister Paige is older. And she died, lost her to suicide in 2019. Super wild time, just going from that straight into 2020 was super weird and interesting. But Paige is just an incredibly kind, loving, nice person. Same thing. I'm a younger sibling, I can get under your skin if I really wanted to. But yeah, we had such a close relationship myself and my younger brother Ben were very, very, very tight knit. And so it was yeah, it was- it was just a crazy hard thing to have to go through. You know, losing a sibling there. Especially my older sister who is wise beyond anybody I know. Just the wisdom she had, I definitely miss now. I find myself often wanting to, to break off a piece of that wisdom when I can, but that's been a big adjustment. And just a full, breaking of your entire family system and

just, you know who you are as a person. For sure. But that's a little bit about Paige. She's a writer. Loves books, loves reading. And one of the only people I know that can out hike me. So definitely, definitely a beautiful person.

### **CHAD**

Obviously in a perfect world we wouldn't be having this conversation. None of us want to be here. I often say at To Write Love, I'm trying to work myself out of a job. I can't wait until the services that we offer, the hope that we provide is ubiquitous, is felt by all, is open to all, is accessible by all. But in the midst of that, I think it's a darkly beautiful thing that we get to remember our loved ones and the ways that we want to, Austin, I was picking up that you were using present tense all throughout this, and I love that. Well, we'll get to that in a little bit. But um, yeah, just really want to acknowledge the the difficulty whether we are, you know, working on a decade plus of life without a loved one, or if this is, you know, just short of three years, or just over three years, you know, that this is all something that's intimate, that that's real, and that's vulnerable. And, again, just want to extend some- some gratitude for that. Also, you mentioned that Paige loved writing. And you kind of came on to our rights as a writer as well. Well, those of y'all Billy, as well, you've written for the To Write Love blog, over the past. But let's start with Austin, you wrote a piece for us called whether it was for us or not, we posted it, but you wrote it. There you go. It was called Grief After Suicide Loss. And just a little excerpt from that, you write, "The lifelong path of grief is hard. It is an unfairly weighted backpack. And anyone that has been on a backpacking trip can tell you that the pack doesn't get lighter, the more you walk with it, you get used to the weight, and you must carry it, but it doesn't get lighter". In what way has acknowledging that you don't have to unpack, you don't have to let go of that pain and heartache, and instead can make more space for it, how was that idea, that process allowed you to find space where multiple emotions can coexist?

### **AUSTIN**

I just talked about this today with my father, I finally have been able to say out loud to my friends and family recently, I'm happy. On this trip, it's been incredibly difficult, hard. bikepacking is very similar to my analogy to backpacking. It's heavy, and you just start carrying it, and you carry it and you carry it. And eventually, when can I start feeling the pain. And then came to the realization like, Oh, you don't have to stop feeling the pain to you know, let the whole story and let the joy that comes in. Now I get a lot of mix of emotions. Like right now I'm like, I'm happy. I'm here. I'm happy I'm on this, this big adventure. That's been incredibly difficult, but just so helpful in me understanding and internalizing my own life and my own grief process. So the idea that I don't have to get over the pain, I don't have to push through it, isn't that something that'll ever end? It's something that it's like, I live with it. Now. My brother and I have a dark saying that we tell each other it's we're still us just with a dead sister. Like I'm still me, I'm just I have a dead sister. That's the only difference is I'm still who I am. And allowing myself to feel how I feel in the moment and be present with my emotions, to feel happy when I feel happy. Just because I have a dead sister doesn't mean I can't feel happy. Those moments are often mixed with grief or the fact that I can't go and tell her about it or you know what happened or what have you in the world but yeah, the the acknowledging of it's okay to to let myself feel happy, sad, you know, any number of emotions and let those in has, has made grief journey so much more bearable, less suffering, and there's less of me putting on expectations on myself for how I need to feel or what I need to feel and more just letting myself feel how it goes. And some days are really heavy, some days feel heavier, some days, it feels lighter. And so just acknowledging that my sister had not only the pain of her loss, but also her life and you know what she was able to give me during that has been a lesson hard learned but I'm glad I learned it for sure.

### **CHAD**

You mentioned sharing a passion of the outdoors with Paige. Were there moments maybe there still are- are there or were there were do perceive a future in which they still may pop up the feelings of remorse or

guilt or shame of enjoying the outdoors without her or has there- where you can in the midst of seeing that- that killer sunset over that mountain. You never thought you would ever get to see. Do you see any winks or smiles there? Or does that still rest heavy?

### **AUSTIN**

No, absolutely, I think I think it just allows, like I talked about presence, but allows you just to get into presence, so much easier in nature. And a lot of it is like, Oh, I would love to share this. I was never a writer to start out with. It's funny that it took losing my sister to suicide for me to actually start writing more, we'd go on hikes together, and I would always be tried to describe what I saw in my writing. And then I would describe it to my sister and her poetry that came out of that was always so much better than what I wrote down. And so I find myself often wanting, like, I wish I had my sister to, she could capture this full moment for everybody else to feel. But a lot of my heavier moments are not tied up in the nature aspect. That's genuine, when we could kind of just be together. And you know, that comfortable silence and just hiking together walking and climbing, whatever it is, we're found in those moments. So those still remain to be a way to tune into myself and listen, more. I'd be lying if I said I haven't been upset on a hike or, you know, if the emotions there, when I'm out hiking or on my bike now, it's going to come up, if I'm, you know, letting myself work. So they definitely come up for sure. But I just talked to my, my brother about this, that it's such a terrible thing. But I have such an appreciation now for life and the difficulties of it. So there'd be days in lightning storms or in the snow, or things are just going awfully wrong here. And I still think like, wow, I have such a deeper appreciation for these like really vulnerable tender moments or really hard moments because my sister died. I now have a more- appreciation, appreciation for life, because I know how fleeting it can be, how quickly it can change in such a major way. That just, it's an appreciation I wish I didn't have to know. But I talked about in my writing that I wish my sister could have met who I am now after her death because I am much more compassionate, much more understanding empathetic person. Because I've seen some of these lows in life. So unfortunately, and fortunately, it comes with a deep appreciation now that I didn't have before.

### **CHAD**

You mentioned in accepting this idea that there will be ups and downs and you know, how apt is that, you know, talking about a hiking lifestyle, biking lifestyle, and that's to be expected, right like that you. You don't want flat terrain after this. You want to feel as if there was something that that changed in you know. So it's a kind of in talking with that, that change of- of elevation, there is still going to be a sense of ultimately, trajectory or a movement. And Billy, you mentioned that and in your piece called Carry My Sister's Story you wrote that you struggled with finding a way to move forward. You had feelings of being guilty for feeling any emotion other than grief. So ultimately, sharing your story has helped you move to and through that grief, but to what degree was opening up about that process important and how you were journeying and how you continue to journey?

### **BILLY**

Yeah, I think the timing of my sister's death really was such a pivotal point in my life, you know, I didn't really have much of an idea of what I wanted to do, I just graduated high school, you know, I knew I was going to college in the fall, I didn't really have a clue of what I wanted to study exactly what I wanted to do. And losing my sister at that point, really just something- something flipped a switch in me and I had always felt, you know, maybe that I had an increased level of compassion or empathy. I always related to sad songs, and music and writing and similar to Austin, you know, I didn't write much myself prior to my sister's death. But I found that sometimes I'll feel kind of call just to share what's going on in my mind with other people, and hopefully, you know, give solace in the way that I found in, you know, TWLOHA blogs along the years, or over the years, rather. Because it was at a pivotal point in my life, I feel like as I went into college, I sort of found myself getting stuck. Thinking that, like, if I wasn't thinking about my sister, and

I wasn't thinking about, like her life and death then who was, you know, like, how am I going to have these new exciting opportunities, you know, whether it's being in school, I was playing hockey, whether it was, you know, going down to Florida to intern with To Write Love, or now even doing what I'm doing, and just thinking about, my sister didn't get those opportunities, her story ended too soon. And mine is still going. And I think Austin had- had written about it too, previously about, there was a point, about five years in when I turned the age my sister never turned. So she died shortly before she turned 23. I remember, when I- her fifth anniversary of her death was right before I turned 23. And so that was like a huge milestone for me to just be like, I'm older than one of my older sisters ever was in that was kind of a hard thing. But yeah, for me, I just found, I think, trying to find a way to voice my story and share it with others. And then kind of the feedback that I received from other people, and the connection through vulnerability that I found was something that really just helped me push forward. And I'd be remiss if I didn't mention that there was another gentleman who had died by suicide. And I had the pleasure of knowing his mom and his brother, and they were a great support too, following the loss of my sister and reached out. And, you know, I think it's a club none of us wanted to join. But I do think when someone like that reaches out to you and expresses their- their sorrow for you, and words of encouragement, it really hits and resonates because, you know, there, unfortunately, are far too many people who can relate and who have joined this club, but I think hearing those words from- from people who have experienced similar things is really takes it up a notch for me, and they were in a huge reason why I started sharing my story. And the mother who had lost her child has done such great work in our community and surrounding communities kind of bring voice and attention to these issues and does things locally with AFSP has, you know, hosted floats in our town parade on the Fourth of July, just calling attention to suicide prevention. And so she was really a huge source of inspiration for me when I was learning how to share my story. And I will note too, and I've kind of learned through Aaron Moore, who's who's working with To Write Love, when to share your story and how to share your story. I think when- I when I was really fresh in my grief, I talked about it before where I felt like I was like screaming from the rooftops and, and hoping anyone would hear me. And I think I'm much more reserved and targeted and where and how I share my story now. I think it's still great to be vulnerable, but knowing with who you can be vulnerable. You know, you shouldn't cry with people who can't laugh with recognizing kind of the heavy and light of life. Something like Austin noted is that I have a really great appreciation for now. But it took a little bit to get there.

## **CHAD**

Like you both mentioned, in many ways it kind of takes one to know one on how to grieve, a loss due to suicide and I'm wondering in your respective contexts, when you experienced that loss, was there a network? Was there a person? Was there a story? Was there a group? Or was there a thing, something that someone did to help? Something that- that felt like care in a way that you didn't know you needed that care? So I guess starting with Austin, you know, you're experiencing this loss right before COVID. Right before no one could gather, whether it was for work or school or peer support. So in that doubly isolating experience, where did you go to find some support? Or where did that support find you?

## **AUSTIN**

That was definitely a rough portion. At the time I was, I was renovating a trailer to live in in Truckee, California. And so I basically fully isolated myself, not the way to go. In my opinion, everybody grieves different, there's no right or wrong way to do it. But if I could tell myself be like, hey, reach out to more people, for sure. But I remember immediately, after my sister died, I flew back from, I was living in Alaska at the time, I flew from Alaska to California. And the next day, shout out to my uncle Marcus. He's like, hey, let's go for a mountain bike ride. And we didn't talk at all. But he treated me like a normal person. Like, you're still you, let's just go for a ride. He knew I needed to process stuff. And there's nothing really you can say . I have not found a word or phrase that you can say to someone besides embodying the feeling of, I'm here, what do you need? And he was just, I'm here, he offered the ride, I could have said

no, I was like, yes. And it was able to get out of kind of the everything we surround death with. The funeral, the planning the, you know, people feel the need to try to fix something that they can't fix, or don't want to sit in the awkward space with you. So there's definitely my uncle, I had some friends at my sister's memorial that I remember, I didn't see them the whole Memorial. And they drove from Oregon to California to, to be there just to support our family, and I didn't see them at all. And I walk upstairs to where they're at and they're all laughing and joking. And I sat down and they didn't stop laughing and joking. They knew just because my sister was dead, that it did not change the fact that I'm still their friend, I still want to laugh and joke with them. Yeah, I'm not saying you know, you should try to, you know, be funny or use humor to cope. But it was nice to know that my friends were still there. And they're still treating me like Austin and not like, you know, just that I had a dead sister that we're not supposed to talk about, because it's suicide. But my friends, that's giving me just treated me normally. They were there for me, they drove me from the airport, they did everything they needed to do. But they didn't try to force on, you know, their hurt on me. So I think just being there for the person. And just doing physical, tangible things that you can do, really helped me. So anytime someone, you know, like, brought food over, I didn't have to worry about cooking food, was amazing. And just just treated us like we are, you know, normal people. But at the same time understood that they just need to be there for us was super helpful for me in those- in those early, early days. And then it's unfortunate that it took my sister's death for me to actually go find a therapist, but I found a great therapist. And that has led to me reaching out and being more comfortable setting boundaries for when like, like Billy talked about, you know, who you can cry with, who you can share with. And also not taking out other people's grief for other loved ones because I'm sure Billy could talk about it a lot. And we're doing it, you know, right now, but grieving people who are, you know, suppressing that grief or those feelings when they find someone else who's in a similar situation. It can be really helpful and healing, but it also can be they can just dump it all out. Cuz I'm very empathetic in that way already. And so there was definitely a learning period on, like, like really talking about sharing your story and when to do it, and the right way to do it, as well as understanding where's the safe place for yourself to not, you know, open up wounds that are still healing or you need more time with on your own or with a therapist.

#### **CHAD**

Billy, with you, you mentioned that your loss came right before a different chapter break, right before you're about to enter another isolating time, but one that's typically marked by celebration with heading off towards college. What did it look like for you to enter this new chapter with expectations and also with heavy realities?

#### **BILLY**

I think I found a lot of support and friends you know, I'm still friends with a lot of the folks I met that first year of school. I think ultimately finding what was kind of my passion being social work, but then even more so kind of social work and advocacy and like, Austin, kind of mentioned, like, I can't carry the weight of everyone, I think I've found a niche that I really like whereas, you know, I still am proudly a social worker. But I don't really necessarily work in direct practice, I'm more interested in inclined and I think it aligns better with my abilities to serve as kind of an advocate and work on what they call the macroscale. So trying to, you know, push policy instead of working directly one on one with someone who's a licensed clinician. And that's really helped me find my voice again. And yeah, even looking back to college, I think having so much support from the migraine and headache disorders community and even still now I know every time I make a post about my sister or share some of my writing or, you know, as soon as this becomes live, those folks will all kind of weigh in and be thankful, you know that we're giving voice to their experiences because, you know, they they've lost folks to suicide or, you know, they've seen the pain in isolation that people living with headache disorders can feel and the stigma attached with that, as well as mental illness. And so I think that every time I feel, you know, low or isolated, there's, you know, more

stories like that than not and that can kind of help bring me back and let me feel like I'm not alone and that I'm kind of on the right path in my journey.

### **CHAD**

Yeah, Billy, you mentioned both, you know, the migraine and headache disorders organization. You've mentioned our friends at AFSP, the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, there are a number of support channels that exists. Austin, you mentioned connecting with a therapist for the first time after, after the loss of your sister, are there any resources that y'all use now today, in the fall of 2023, that you wish you would have known existed before?

### **AUSTIN**

One of the ones that's interesting in sibling grief, my brother and his grief is different completely. But I kind of wish I would embrace that more. We have now and we go through it a ton. But it's one of the like unique griefs. And again, if I'm looking for a silver lining in it, is the fact that I have someone who is a sibling who lost an older sister as well. And so we have that, that connection. So that's something I wish I leaned in more, more to. And then I knew about therapy. My sister, you know, was talking about how it's a good thing to kind of make yourself better, I wish I would have gone sooner. But can't change that now. But the one I wish I would embrace more is- is the sibling grief whether that other siblings out there, like Billy, or if that was just, you know, talking to my brother, because he had a very similar situation that you can't get in almost any other kind of grief.

### **BILLY 30:35**

My oldest sister, you know, like you were saying she's processed things entirely differently than I have. But we have that common thread. And my mom as well, my mom's done kind of a lot of behind the scenes advocacy. I know folks within my community often like look to me as being very public and out in the open, was sharing my story and working kind of to address some of these issues. But my mom's sort of behind the scenes has been such a resource for so many, both in our community through social media. So she- she does really great work. And I want to kind of acknowledge that. As far as formal resources. Yeah, I think the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention was something that I look to a lot. I think I- I'm always curious about my timeline with To Write Love on Her Arms. You know, I think I had probably had a wristband or a t shirt from Warped Tour before my sister's death. But then I really did find the blogs kind of in the months that followed. And I'm not sure if someone had sent one to me, or if I just sort of found it on my own search. But I really kind of fell in love with reading the blogs and hearing stories from other folks. I think I love words, and I love songs. And you know, the way people kind of vocalize their emotions. And for me, I think it was always harder to find my own voice with that. But you know, whenever there was a song that I could relate to, or a blog I could relate to that always really inspired me and yeah, and then just a lot of informal kind of conversations through- through folks and different experiences and just just moving through grief that way.

### **CHAD**

Billy, you were mentioning the posture, the when do I say something? How do I say it? What is a responsible way to share my story, all of this is kind of summed up in this idea of stigma, we know that suicide is a tough thing to talk about. If it were easy, then we wouldn't need a commemorative month, you know, to talk solely about prevention, this would just be something that is part of our day in day out language. And with that stigma comes a ton of misconceptions. And there's one thing to talk about someone that is personally struggling with suicidal ideation, or has attempted or has, has perished due to suicide. But there's also coworkers and friends and family left in the wake to answer some of these questions, or at the very least bear the weight of the stigma. So in what ways did the stigma of that loss, find its way to you? What has helped fight back against that stigma? Oftentimes, when we talk about



stigma, we're talking, you know, something synonymous with shame. What has been helpful in pushing back against any sort of residual guilt or shame?

### **BILLY**

I grew up in a small town. So it was kind of hard to keep a secret, even if stigma would have wanted us to, it was pretty open news, how my sister had died. And so there wasn't a ton of space for that. I do think there's been points, and my mom, for example, I think she's always been more comfortable pointing to kind of the headache disorders and migraine side of my sister's life, whereas I've been comfortable living in kind of the wake of the suicide, and talking about that. So I think maybe that that was a role that stigma could play. And, yeah, I think I was very interested in trying to change that dynamic. And unfortunately, a few months after my sister's death, I actually lost a classmate from high school to suicide as well. And so then we did kind of a rally and kind of a memorial for the folks that we had lost just in my small town of a few thousand people to kind of air out these issues and talk about suicide in a very public way. And so I think that for me, was really a turning point and saying, you know, this is my story, I'm going to, I'm going to own this. It's no secret, and I'm going to work to actively fight maybe that stigma that I'm feeling, I think in talking about it now. And maybe Austin can relate, there does come a point where I'm very comfortable talking about it. You know, I've had a lot of time and to process I've had a lot of conversations about it such as this. But there are some kind of awkward times maybe when I'm meeting a new colleague, and you know, the the topic of family gets brought up and, you know, how many siblings do you have? And it's like, well, do I do I want to open up this- this can of worms speak the truth and be like, well, I have two sisters, one died. And then if I want to be very truthful, one died by suicide, and how is that going to kind of impact or do I kind of just move across it? And that doesn't feel right. So that's just something that I've noticed over the last 10 years, that has always kind of been an interesting dynamic for me. And, you know, the folks close to me know, a lot of strangers know, because I've written about it, I've spoke about it. But still Just some of those nuanced conversations that trying to find the best way to approach it. In a perfect world. You know, there'd be a place for every conversation to talk openly and honestly, but I still think that sometimes you just have to really think about the most appropriate way to handle those conversations.

### **AUSTIN**

I don't know how much stigma played into it. Mainly because my sister talked about mental health. But time probably one of the biggest advocates I knew for it was my sister. And the one thing I knew at her funeral that she would want, you know, we knew struggles, we talked about death, a fair amount. And so I knew that she wanted me to address mental health. So at her, her memorial, my brother and I, when given the eulogy also talked about mental health and how she didn't want it to be swept under the rug. So my sister kind of forced us into it. And by saying, This is what she wanted, at a memorial if she ever had one, and when she did, my brother like, well, this is I guess, she asked us to, so we're gonna go do it. And we're pretty good walking in awkward waters. I think there's ways that you can kind of relate it. One of the ways I think is very funny is letting people into the awkward moments. Like Billy said, people asked about your family all the time. And like, oh, yeah, I have a brother in law. And like oh married to your brother, to your sister. And I was like, I was married to my sister, is married to my sister. You know, it's one of those things where when I say it, sometimes people like feel the awkwardness. I'm like, That's okay to feel awkward. And it is, it is weird that I have a brother in law, who's married to a sister that's dead. That is, that is, you know, weird. And he'll never stop being a brother in law to me. So I think, letting people into the weird moments. And I always ask, not always, but I asked a lot. Where's the weirdest place people have cried. You know, because I think as, as someone, survivor of suicide loss, I think we collect those weird moments of weird places you've cried. And that's always an interesting one, because it gives like a little window into the world of sometimes everything can look or seem normal and fine. But you're crying alone, or you're crying in a crowd full of people, when just before you were laughing, and it's

just a matter of, I guess, just allowing it to be weird when it's weird. It's people, you know, there's times where I'm like, I understand that the social contract at a supermarket when someone says how's your day going, is not to burden them with my problems. But if my Hey, you know, we really want to go there, that's totally fine. Yeah, I have a sister died by suicide. And as long as I feel like I'm not crossing any of their, you know, social boundaries of, they don't want to share that. But for me, I think my sister always wanted mental health to be at the forefront of the conversation because she was pushing for it. Her whole life, and she started with eating disorders and bipolar. But, you know, that doesn't define her. But she definitely wanted to, you know, kind of lessen that stigma. So I luckily had an older sister already kind of paving the way for me to walk into that stigma. And I think just being okay, that things are weird and awkward after death and things are hard to talk about. But if you're okay, just being with people, I think there's a way to get through it and just acknowledging that some things are weird.

[music playing]

### **LINDSAY KOLSCH**

The world is not better without you. That's the statement we're declaring defiantly in honor of our 2023 Suicide Prevention Month campaign. We believe those words to be true to their core. The world would not be made better in the absence of your presence, of your existence. To help spread this message and movement, we invite you to join us by learning more and purchasing a pack at [link]. The Suicide Prevention Pack is special in that it gives you the tools to check in with those you love, start conversations that challenge stigma, make professional resources known, and learn what mental health care options exist for those struggling. And as a thank you for tuning into the podcast, you can enter the code PODCAST20 at checkout for 20% off your order.

[music playing]

### **CHAD**

I would love for y'all to just take a little moment about what your life post this loss has looked like in terms of your aspirations, in terms of your professions, in terms of your dreams, and how you're embodying them. Y'all have taken very different paths, and what life has looked like. And while those differ, they also share a common thread of community. So Austin, if you could just share a little bit about how nature came into play, and how specifically with your journey with your organization that again, that's called We Shall Continue With Style. Talk a bit about Yeah, I guess the the formation of that the- the aspirations behind it and how that continues to play a role in your, in your grief journey.

### **AUSTIN**

Absolutely. So there's a- there's a bad climbing movie about- called the Eiger Sanctions. Clint Eastwood, very interesting movie. And there's a line in it, where a guy is about to fall, and he said, We're gonna fall, someone says, No, we're not. And he said, if we do fall, we shall continue with style. And then he falls then dies. And I love that line. I was like, such an absurd weird line. I don't know what I'm gonna use that for. But it felt connected to it. Years go by. And then and then my sister died. And one thing led to another, my sister died. My sister died. And I was just not taking care of myself in the best way at the time. of, you know, do work, work as hard as I can and work as hard as my body heals. Let me have as many hours, go home, sleep, eat, repeat. And that- was that was life. And I was like, Well, my sister has taken another life as I've stopped living entirely. And so on her birthday, I went out for a hike. I was like, I'm gonna go for a hike. And then I just let all the emotions out. I was out on my own hiking, it was snowy, there was wind. I was in Montana. And I would just, like I said, throwing fists at the sky. I was angry. But I was allowing myself to feel again. And I was like I need I need something or want something to, to feel like I'm living, not just surviving. Because right now I'm just surviving baseline surviving, like, what's the big adventure

you've wanted to do? And like, I've always wanted to go on large bikepacking adventure. So I was like, well, South America is amazing. My Spanish is terrible. Let's give it a go. And so I started telling people about it. And people started asking, why? Why are you doing this? And the short answer is, I needed a big change. I wanted to feel again, and I wanted to give myself time and space, to internalize life and to feel and to feel like I'm not just totally going, you know, myth of Sisyphus on you, pushing the boulder up the hill, not finding the joy in the rolling of the rock, but I wanted to feel again and I plan this trip and things worked out in the way of the Max G foundation. It's actually not so much my story to tell but the owner of Kona Bikes has actually experienced a suicide loss. And my dad met with him. And they were like, hey, we'd love to have you in the baster for this program, sweet, and how cycling can help in recreational therapy can help people process grief. And I think originally, if you told me, I was going to be alone with my thoughts, 12 hours a day on my bike, that would probably be the worst thing for me. To be alone in nature, just like not something I want to keep replaying in my head. But I think I got to a point, my grief journey where being alone in nature, was such an easy way to fall into presence fall into the here and now allow myself to feel through things. And then I like, we shall continue in style. There's the we in there. And then there's the continue. And continuing is something all of us humans need to do. Billy can talk about I'm sure Chad you can talk about it is the one thing we do is continue on. So not just continuing on, but do it with style. And everybody has their own style and their own way that they do everything, but also how we live with grief. So I love highlighting and seeing how everybody really does. I don't think going on an 18,000 mile bike ride is the way for everybody to go through grief. I wouldn't recommend it for everybody. But there's people out there that I think get inspired by different grief journeys. And I know I do. So I didn't see importance in sharing my story. At first, I was like, Oh, this is my story. No one cares, no one wants to hear it. It's not going to help. And I think those are the thoughts that we really need to block out when it comes to sharing our stories because, you know, talking to a musician artist who after they lost their best friend to suicide, their music. Technically, he was really good. But after that he was more open to sharing his feelings and his music became vulnerable and real. And just seeing how he continues now after that. So I started to open up, I asked my family like is this okay thing to share? I'm about to expose all of us to the world of people asking questions and people, you know, coming into our life and we can, sharing Paige's story on a larger scale. My family like of course, I think she would, she would love this. So it turned out that now I have 37 names painted on my bike, have people lost too soon, traumatic losses in life, and just getting over those traumatic grief. So now I have 37 people that come with me and stories that continue on. And I keep adding names to the bike, which is terribly sad, but also I love that they're with me and we get to remember all these people.

#### **CHAD**

Again, we don't want to be here. We don't want this conversation. But the fact that it's happening, makes me want to say get on if you if you are if you relate to this hop on this bike with me, please. Yeah, you've never been expected to get through this loss alone. You don't get bonus points for doing it alone. I'm I'm here we are here dude, I love, I love that we

#### **AUSTIN**

Yeah, the we part is the only part that makes this possible. Like, everybody continues. Or, you know, most people continue. There's that that does, you know, contagious part of suicide that lives on. There definitely needs to be talked about as well. But you know, you're continuing on and you start to feel more and more isolated in your own grief. But the amount the time I was able to ask for help and let people in awesome people are helping and like I said, I have so many people go with me and share their stories of how they're continuing on and so the We is just the that's the part that makes you know difference between isolation and terrible sadness Eldritch Horror, and something that has turned into a beautiful way to keep people's stories alive and keep discussing grief and suicide loss

**CHAD**

And Billy on your side of things, if you could tell me just a little bit about your journey, and you touched on it briefly before, but just on how? How does one come from a small Illinois town to one of the most transient and busy cities in the Western Hemisphere?

**BILLY**

Yeah, so following my sister's death, you know, I was trying to sort of find a way to combine my story, the pain I felt and find purpose and what I felt good doing career wise, what I wanted to study in school. And for me, suicide prevention, mental health kind of were top of mind, obviously, a being so fresh with my grief. And so I decided to pursue social work and was going through the coursework there. The summer of my sophomore year after my sophomore year, rather, I interned with To Write Love on Her Arms down in Melbourne. That was such a formative summer doing life alongside the staff and the other interns. And when I came back from Florida, and I was in my- my first semester of junior year, I had a course, social welfare and policy. And one of the professors there, in that class explained that, you know, you could be the best clinician in the whole world, and you'll help, you know, X amount of people in incredibly deep ways each year. But unless we have people who think like you who care about things like you do, you know, as executive directors, on boards, drafting legislation, then both the profession that you're going into, and the people we're trying to serve, both are going to struggle. And that struck such a deep chord with me. I really go back to that class, my junior year, and just thinking that, you know, I don't know, if I would have been kind of a good traditional counselor or social worker, I really have always sort of aligned and empathized and felt empowered when I'm sharing stories, and when I'm lifting things up, in kind of a public way. And so that's something that I've always wanted to do. And a lot of people you know, Washington DC working in politics wouldn't be kind of their first thing they think of when they think about, you know, building communities and lifting stories up. But, you know, that's something I do in my job all the time is meet with people, learn about the challenges they're experiencing, and then try to, you know, work on solutions for that. And politics obviously gets a bad rap, and rightfully so in a lot of ways. But for me, you know, it's, it's always felt like a place that I think of the Teddy Roosevelt quote, that the man at the arena and Brene Brown talks about it daring greatly. And, you know, I've always thought that I would rather be, you know, getting the shit kicked out of me and trying to make a difference than be on the sidelines complaining.

**CHAD**

Billy, you just might be my favorite politician.

**AUSTIN**

I love it. Well, I'd love to see it.

**CHAD**

I kind of want to bring this back to one of the points that we started with. AI and we've been talking about it throughout the conversation as well. But to reference a another contributor on the trade log, our friend, Carrie Thompson, they wrote, this is actually for a Suicide Prevention Month blog. Carrie said that it's so important, as we acknowledge the loss due to suicide that we also remember that those we lost also lived. That's probably the thing that we ultimately limit the most is that there was a living that that we wanted to see continue, which is, you know, very nuanced that the, the passing that weighs heavy, but what we miss is, is a continuation of that life that we loved. So to honor that desire in remembering how your sisters, how our loved ones lived. Would either of you like to share a special memory or moment or aspects about your sister? Maybe an unconventional way that that you still see them that you still experienced them? Or, whatever you want, just kind of open mic to brag on, on our loved ones.

## **BILLY**

My sister was kind of a larger than life personality. incredibly silly, Goofy, love to be the center of attention. She was the middle child. So I think that kind of weighed into her personality and, and wanting to kind of not be overshadowed by by the youngest or the oldest. And like I said, I remember just sort of mundane memories, her coming into my room bugging me, you know, I'm trying to play Xbox or talk with my friends and having your older sister come in and, and bother you is so annoying and frustrating. And I'm sure I let her know that. But I think so much about those messages. And you know, the instant messages from if she was downstairs and I was upstairs and I was just texting each other ridiculous things or sharing songs once I was in high school, and we had, you know, similar music tastes. And then I was reflecting on it recently, as we kind of passed the 10 year mark, earlier this summer. And one of the last conversations, but probably the last conversation I had with my sister, I remember, we were in the kitchen. And for whatever reason, you know, probably because she knew that, that that might be one of our final conversations, she told me that she was proud of me. And you know that she was proud of the person I was becoming and how I had dealt with some adversity in high school, and then that she was really excited to watch me play hockey in college or pursue my dreams in that way. And so that's kind of a memory that I'll hold dearly, forever. Just sort of thinking about how, at the time, I'm sure I didn't appreciate what that conversation looked like. Or what it meant to her kind of the courage it might have taken her to share that with me. But I think about that, and there was, she also wrote something like that on Facebook. And you know, I took a screenshot of it and I have my camera roll so I can read it whenever I need to kind of a boost. And like Austin touched on earlier, like, I wish I could, my sister could see me now she could meet me now where I'm at. You know, I was a young, selfish kid. I couldn't quite always understand what she was going through with her physical health conditions. But you know, I'd hope that I've made her proud and that the way I carry her, her story forward is meaningful and makes a difference.

## **AUSTIN**

I have a question about that eventually, but I'm curious Chad. Have you ever gotten someone to give you like a bad story? I always tell when I put a name on my bike. Like hey, can I know something about them? Good. You know something that reminds me you are bad and no one's ever given me something. Bad. Which I think is very funny because one of my little pastimes is trying to remember the things that annoyed me about my sister. Because I don't want to lose. You know, she's more than just the amazing person she was but often that gets remembered sometimes. Like, she annoyed me sometimes. So I'm just curious. Have you ever gotten someone to be like, yeah, they were really annoying or?

## **CHAD**

You get, you get some of those. Ah, that son of a bitch, you know, got. But I think you know, so often, it's definitely counterbalanced by that sense of, but, man, what I wouldn't give for them to pull one more prank on me. What I wouldn't give for them to hit me up for another 50 bucks. And I know, I won't get paid back man, what I wouldn't give for that. So it's a- it's all perspective.

## **AUSTIN**

Exactly. But yeah, I'm just curious. I like to remember the whole picture. You know, there's, there's so many, with, with my sister, I have so many stories. And I was very happy to learn from talking to people, in my barely passable Spanish, just about Dia De Los Muertos when I was in Mexico, learning about those traditions that were leftover from, you know, a culture that had totally different views on death than we do. And so I like the idea of remembering with a story or just remembering who they are every year. Last year on- on October 31, November 1, I shared a story about my sister. We lived together, off and on in our adult life. And when we were living in Oregon together, I went out for a bike ride. And it was so late at night we were supposed to go study, get coffee and go study together that night. And I was like, I just need to get a bike ride. And I'm- have a lot of bottled up feelings. And I don't know how to express that.

And she called me out of match. Like you need to find other ways besides exercise to express your emotions. But anyway, so she dropped me off at the top of the mountain because I didn't have enough time to go up and back down before the sun went down. And as I started to write, writing, I realized it's it's dark, it's about to be so pitch black, I'm in the shade of a mountain. There's no more twilight, I can barely see and I'm on a pretty technical mountain bike trail. And so I was like, I'm gonna write as fast as I can because it crosses the road to catch up to my sister and so I cross the road and I see her tail lights still pulling ahead. And so I ride fast and across the road. I see her still pulling ahead and I stop. And then I see her go the other direction looking for me because she called my mom to ask what to do. And mom's like, well, he can't be out there, it's dangerous. Go find him. And so we were playing tag chasing each other up and down this road, middle of night. And she had a lot of better things to be doing on that night than chasing her little brother over a mountain, back and forth looking for him. And, and when I got in the car, she's like, that was a dumb thing to do. I was like, it was a dumb thing to do. And my phone didn't have service, it was everything that I didn't bring anything as a light, and I was dressed in all black. So I did everything wrong when it comes to riding your bike at night, fact that she was, she was very kind with me afterwards. And we went and got coffee, and studied. And yeah, I think there's a lot of things I miss. Like I said, I miss the wisdom she would impart to me often and her ability to go above and beyond for her younger brothers, she was always there for us, whatever we needed. And that's something that I definitely did not realize how important it was to hear my sister sometimes get on my case about bottling up my feelings or not letting not being myself around other people. So I think her being able to see me was something that she was very good at. She was very good at seeing people and listening.

[music playing]

#### **CHAD**

Thank you, thank you, thank you to both Austin and Billy for showing up for this conversation with vulnerability, humor, and honesty. Your stories and your sisters' stories are not only important but also precious to us. I'm still floored with the honor of being able to receive them. We believe they allow us to grow and better understand suicide and grief—to better understand what it is to be human and to feel such a wide range of emotions.

And to you, our listeners, our gratitude for your time, attention, and energy is endless. This podcast exists to hold space for honest and hard things, but it also exists for you. We hope this season has inspired empathy, healing, warmth, laughter, authenticity, and intrigue. We look forward to next year and next season knowing that you will be alongside us. And thank you to our fearless podcast leader, editor, and producer, Becky Ebert. To all the interns who help transcribe this season, and to the Sound On Sound Off team for making each episode beautiful. And for the last time this year, we're so glad you're here.

[music playing]

#### **CHAD**

We hope this episode has been a reminder, that your story is important, you matter, and that you're not alone.

If you're struggling right now, know that it's OK to reach out, and that there are people who want to help. Part of our mission is to connect people to the help they need and deserve. You can find local mental health resources on our website [twloha.com](https://www.twloha.com). That's T-W-L-O-H-A.com. And Click FIND HELP at the top of the page.

If you're in the US or Canada, and need to talk to someone right now, you can always text our friends at Crisis Text Line. Simply text the word TWLOHA— again, that's T W L O H A—to 741741. You'll be connected to a crisis counselor. It's free, confidential, and available 24/7. For a list of crisis support resources for listeners living outside of the United States, please visit [TWLOHA.com](http://TWLOHA.com) and click on the International Resources tab.

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