A person is running on a beach at sunset. The person is wearing a dark hooded jacket and dark pants. The background is a blurred ocean with golden light reflecting on the water. The person is running from left to right, and their shadow is cast on the sand.

**A special reprint
Of Chapter 43**

MY LIVING WILL

A Father's Story of Loss & Hope

John Trautwein

An Excerpt From:

My Living Will

A Father's Story of Loss & Hope

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Foreword by Joe Girardi

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Chapter 43

“Do You Want to Be Dead?”

I have given over three hundred speeches since the foundation began, and not once have I told people I’m speaking about teen suicide awareness, education, or prevention. The reason is actually very obvious and very disturbing: no one would come.

Increasing the will to live is what I’m trying to do when I speak to teenagers and their families. I use words like “life teammates,” “Love ya, man,” and, “Good teams win, but great teams love each other.” If there is one thing I’ve learned over this short time since the foundation began it’s this: if you mention suicide or mental health issues, people will automatically disappear. The stigma associated with it is devastating.

As the foundation continued to grow in its second year, I was asked to be a keynote speaker for a suicide awareness task force in Johns Creek, GA. We were working with the community and city of Johns Creek, and we were going to give four presentations at four high schools in one week, each night at a different school. With me as the keynote speaker, the idea was to have parents hear a real story from a fellow parent. They would hear my story, straight from the mouth of a suicide survivor, and hear from me all that I’ve learned and witnessed as a leader of a foundation that works closely with kids. They also brought in four or five experts each night—mental health experts, suicidologists, people who work crisis hotlines. Real knowledge and real information—what a great way to educate the community. We tried to market it. Each student went home with flyers saying the presentation would take place in early October. E-mails to parents were sent out, and school counselors tried to publicize it. We had media there. We invited all we could to come to our Suicide Awareness Task Force.

The meetings were excellent, with so much information. Even after two years of exposure, I learned so much. I wished so hard that I could have gone to a meeting like this *before* Will died. I was convinced that if I had, he’d still be alive today. There was just one problem: not many people came. There were twenty-five people there each night. The week before,

each school had between six hundred and seven hundred people there for their curriculum nights.

I started each presentation with something like, “Ladies and gentlemen, I’m so disappointed in the low turnout tonight, but I get it. You know why? Because two years ago, before my son died, I most certainly would not have come to a meeting like this.” I tell the crowd that back then, I would have said “It’s great that it’s happening, but I don’t need to go. My kids are fine; suicide is not an option in *my* home.” I then showed a huge picture of my beautiful son on the large screen behind me. “I was wrong,” I continued. “Suicide has no prejudice. It’s not something only for the other side of town, or other side of the streets, or for the poor and downtrodden, or from broken homes. No, my friends, suicide is everywhere, and I beg you to listen to me tonight.”

I told my story to these tiny groups, but as you can imagine, the people in the audience were there for a reason; they already had a story. I’d like to think that I was good and effective during these presentations, but to me, the panel was better. They answered questions like, “Should we speak to our kids about suicide?” The panel answered, “Yes, definitely!” They would go on to say that so many people feel that if you talk to your kids about suicide, you are in danger of putting the idea in to their heads. Well, it’s *already* in their heads. According to the American Academy of Pediatrics (<http://www2.aap.org/advocacy/childhealthmonth/prevteensuicide.htm>) Over 60 percent of high school kids today have thought about suicide in their lives, and all of them have heard of it. It’s everywhere. No, The best thing parents can do is talk about it directly, and honestly.

“Are you thinking of hurting yourself?”

“Do you or have you had suicidal thoughts?”

“Do you feel that any of your friends are struggling?”

Those are such tough questions, but that is *exactly* what the experts say to ask. It will show the person you’re speaking to that you are taking him or her seriously and understand the person may be really struggling. You are not judging. Instead, you’re showing that you understand what he or she is up against, and that is a huge step. I asked the panel if it wasn’t a good idea for people too scared to be that direct to use my story as an example

by saying, “I heard Mr. Trautwein speak today. His son Will killed himself two years ago, and Mr. Trautwein is trying hard to spread awareness. He’s so sad about his son, but it’s such a good thing he’s doing.”

The parent could then take the opportunity to indirectly bring up the subject on a more personal level by asking, “Do you hear anything about suicide, depression, mental health, or kids struggling in your school or class?” A less-direct angle could be, “Would you know what to do if one of your friends confronted you with suicidal thoughts?”

The experts said anything that gets that conversation going is a great thing, and yes, it’s easier to use someone else’s story to get that ball rolling. “Please, people, I beg of you, use my story, and use me, and my presentation tonight, to begin a conversation with your kids. Even if your child is fine, you may spark something in him or her that gets your child to tell you about a friend he or she knows is struggling.”

To all the readers of this book, if you are a parent, use me, use this book to break the ice; it will make it easier. I beg of you. Will would want me to say this, and he’d want you to do that.

As I finished my speech, many people in the audience had tears in their eyes, and some were crying. I, however, was not. I knew I was onto something and that I had to continue driving this point home. It could improve and even save a life! I knew that it definitely would be easier to get the conversation going by talking about my story. If one family does that, and communication improves as a result, I’ve accomplished what I’ve set out to do.

The conversation with the task force, however, was not over, because the experts refused to let the conversation end there. One of them stood up and said, “Please, this is important. Asking the question is only one step. Once you ask the, ‘Are you thinking suicidal thoughts?’ question, you must be prepared that the answer you get may be yes!”

Everyone in the audience nodded. You could hear a pin drop as we all let that soak in. What if our child says, “Yes, I am thinking of killing myself?” Then this nice lady from the Georgia Crisis line said, “Well one

of the most effective things to do is to obviously acknowledge that they are serious, but what we find is an excellent way to get the suicidal person to begin thinking in a different way is to ask this: ‘Okay, I understand, but can I ask you this? Do you really want to be dead?’”

She continued by explaining that the logic is to get them to think not only about the *act* of suicide but its *result* and *consequences*. If they complete suicide, they will be dead, and that means they will no longer be able to

- ☒ Do their favorite things anymore
- ☒ Hang out with their best friends anymore
- ☒ Partake in the things in life that bring them joy

I sat there stunned. I thought it was brilliant. If I’d only had the chance to say something like that to Will, maybe, just maybe, things would have turned out differently. “Do you really want to be dead, Will? Do you really never want to be able to play lacrosse again? How about music and your guitar? Do you really want to never play your guitar again, ever? Never swim in the ocean, hang out with Mickey D and Blake? Do you really want that, Will? Or do you just want this pain you are feeling to go away?” The audience sat there in science when she said that over 90 percent of the time, the answer is always a form of, “Well I guess I just want this pain to go away.” I have no idea if her statistics are accurate, I did not research them. I do, however, believe them.

I’m certain that’s what Will would have said if I had asked that question. Think of the possibilities that question could have opened had I known to ask it. Think of the discussion we could have had. Maybe he would have finally broken down and told me everything. Maybe he would have finally let down his guard and told me he was unhappy, and life wasn’t going to be all right. Maybe ... I had to stop; I could feel the pain in my chest returning as I thought about it. Maybe nothing would have changed at all. I will wish to my dying day that I had known to ask that question. I know nothing is certain, and I’ll never know for sure, but I do have the right to believe it. I knew him very well, and I’ll go to my grave thinking that Will just wanted the pain to go away, and suicide was the only way his young mind could figure out how to make that happen. I feel that there is sound logic in what I’m saying here, and that gives me some strength and hope that

perhaps others can learn from this—learn from me, learn from our family. Will would want that.

At the end of each of the task force meetings, at least one parent would approach me and tell me about the awful situation he or she was in regarding his or her child. Several were on suicide watch, sleeping in the same room to be sure or checking on them every two hours every night.

Others told me of the terrible events that were happening. Drugs, car crashes, arrests, DUI's—all these things that their children were getting into as a result of their mental states.

All I could say was, “God bless you, and if I can help in any way, please let me know.” I always said, “You are doing the right thing. Your child has given you a shot – an opportunity to help – and that’s a good thing. It’s very hard, but you’re not alone. There are millions of people in your situation, too. It’s not your fault.”

What I did *not* say, but really wanted to say was this.

“Please know that I would give anything and everything I own to be able to sleep outside my son’s room on a suicide watch, or to get a phone call from his teacher telling me he’s flunking or being disruptive in class, or from the principal kicking him out of school. I wish I’d get a call from the police saying he’s had a DUI and been arrested. I also wish that I would get a call from the high school lacrosse coach, saying he was caught smoking pot or drinking on the spring trip. I would give all I own to get twenty college rejections letters today for Will. Yes, everything I own.”

That week I did not say those things. I didn’t have the guts. Since then, however, there have been times when I have said something to that effect with the sole purpose of putting things in perspective.

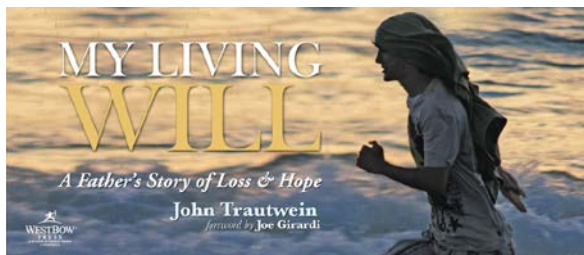
All these negative things parents fear on a daily basis, I would give my right arm to have happen to us with Will. I beg of people to put that into their perspective when these problems do arise

because they do and will. Always remember, I'd trade places with you in a heartbeat when they do arise. "So what your son or daughter got rejected from the University of Georgia. So what!" I want to scream it. I'd give all I own for Will to get a rejection letter from every college he applied to.

Some months after the suicide task force meetings, the local Fox TV News station interviewed Susie and me at our home here in Atlanta. As usual I was the one who got most of the questions, as I typically do most of the speaking regarding the foundation and what we're all about. In this interview, however, it was Susie who made the real impact as she aggressively went after this concept of really talking to your kids and asking the difficult questions. I had been talking about life teammates and kids recognizing the great friends and loves that are in their lives now and reaching out to them. Susie, however, bluntly challenged viewers to "Talk to your kids, ask the difficult questions ... please ask the questions."

She did it so quietly, yet it was so impactful. It made me realize our work with the kids was not going to be enough. We had to continue this push with the parents and other trusted adults in our kids' lives. If we are going to really beat this thing, teen suicide, we have to fight it, and we'll have to fight it hard and loud. It was staring me in the face. To do that, parents had to become more aware. We promised we would talk about it. We promised we would expose our lives, and we have, we are, and we will. But what Susie taught me that night, during that interview, is that we can help more than just the kids. It's the parents, who, just like us, were never taught to talk about suicide, depression, and mental health.

Talk about it!



To purchase your SIGNED copy of MY LIVING WILL, please click here:

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All Proceeds From your purchase through the link above, go to the Will To Live Foundation. A 501(c)(3) Public Charity that was created for and by the kids to:

- **Raise the Awareness of teen suicide in our communities**
- **Increase Education around mental illnesses like depression and their stigmas**
- **Deliver Hope to teens everywhere!**

Love Ya Man!

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