

Sharing Your Burdens

by Sam Denious

There is a long-standing tradition in this country of raising boys to be disciplined, hard-working gentlemen who can go into society and give their full effort in whatever role they need to fill. For many parents, coaches, and educators, this has been manifested in the emphasis of toughness in young boys. Boys have been taught that being tough is never crying, that crying is demonstrating weakness. Our culture preaches that stoicism is the ultimate sign of masculinity and that demonstrating emotion is inherently feminine. Boys have been taught to never complain. Boys have been taught to treat their emotions as their enemies and that they need to push certain emotions down into the depths of their very being, where they won't be seen or heard.

“Stop whining.”

“You don't know how good you've got it.”

“Get it together.”

“Don't let your emotions get the best of you.”

In youth sports, many coaches correctly emphasize the dangers of becoming emotional. In contact sports, a kid's anger can drive him to try to target another player with the intent of hurting that person. I have no problem with coaches trying to prevent this because this is a time when it truly is beneficial to put your emotions to the side for your own benefit and the benefit of those around you. When I was a young kid, I struggled with this. I have some scarring memories of getting so angry on athletic fields that I would try to hurt another player, sometimes succeeding.

Coaches told me that my emotions were getting the best of me and that I needed to control them in order to have more success on the field. I was told to just take a deep breath and to channel my emotions into playing hard in my next opportunity. This was sage advice, and I think about it every time I'm on the field to this day.

I have been lucky, in my life, to have a great family. I have awesome cousins, aunts, uncles, two wonderful parents, and my two brothers: the two most important people in my life. They have always been the foundation to my very existence, and too often I forget how important they are to me. To have a family like mine is a privilege denied to many. Unfortunately for me, I never realized how great it was until it was ripped out from underneath me. The summer before my senior year of high school, my parents began to act very strange. Both of my brothers were here at camp, and I was living at home with my mom and dad. I was enjoying a relaxed summer lifestyle, playing lacrosse and hanging out with my buddies, oblivious to how perfect my life was. My parents began to appear guarded around me, and I could tell something was wrong. Soon, the news was broken abruptly that my parents would be separating. My perfect family was all of the sudden gone, tarnishing that which had guided me throughout my entire life. I became profoundly sad in a way I had never experienced before, and I hope to never experience that again.

Two Sundays ago Townley gave a Chapel Talk on things that are hard to talk about. He bravely let us know of an experience from this past year. I am trying to channel his same energy as I speak now because this is really hard for me to talk

about. However, that is exactly why I must. It is a burden for me, one that I don't want to have to carry alone.

My sadness during my parent's separation was like nothing I have ever felt. It transcended the borders of physical and emotional distress. I felt sad physically, mentally, and emotionally. I could do my best to put it aside when I was at school or practice, but the sadness was an undertone to everything I did. I had this never ending pit in my stomach. When I thought about what was happening to my family, I felt like I was going to vomit. Being alone became a chore because I would cry uncontrollably and be unable to stop. "I can't go on like this," I thought to myself. I needed to change something, so I did what I knew best. I did what lacrosse and all the other sports I have played taught me. I put my emotions to the side and focused on doing my job. "Stop complaining," I told myself. "You don't realize how good you've got it. So what if you're parents are separating. Millions of other people would still kill to be in your shoes." For a while this mentality kept me out of the darkness. I could focus on my schoolwork, practice, or my college application all day and never have to think about what was happening to me. Burying myself in this tedious work would keep my mind at ease, at least for part of each day, but I still couldn't avoid the pit in my stomach, nor could I avoid the tears when I was alone. But I kept at it. Soon, this led to isolation from the people closest to me. In focusing all of my attention away from my emotions, I ignored my mother, who was struggling worse than anyone, and failed to comfort my younger brother, who knew even less about how to deal with this than I did. Eventually, someone came to my aid. My math teacher and lacrosse coach told me he wanted to have lunch one day,

just him and me. He asked me if everything was ok, and for some reason I felt compelled to tell him that I was really struggling with what was going on in my life. I really didn't even mean to. I didn't want anyone to know. It was like an out of body experience. Something in the back of my mind just forced me to tell him. And he listened. He then told me to go to this program we had at my high school called peer counseling, where boys would all go into a classroom during lunch and talk with each other and as a group about whatever was on their mind. And so I went. At first I never shared anything, but eventually I found the strength, among my friends and peers, to share what was going on in my life. It was a close friend of mine who invited me to share with the group, and I owe so much to him for it. Slowly, I began to share more and more with each passing session. Eventually, I went in front of the whole group and, through violent sobs, shared what I was going through. I told them about my parents, about how I felt like my life had been ripped out from under me, and about how I felt abandoned, but also guilty because I was basically ignoring my mother, father, and brothers as they struggled with me. I spilled it all. And all of the sudden, I felt a heavy weight lifted off of my shoulders. I could make sense of it. I felt better. The sadness didn't leave, it never will, but it changed. It became something I understood, something I could manage. It became something I could talk honestly about, even with my family. This process did not happen overnight. It took time. It's something I'm still fighting with as I stand here today. However, now I know who to turn to for help. Opening up to my peers in a completely safe space proved to be the only way I could be helped. The sadness I felt was a burden, one that I was trying to carry alone. By talking to my peers about what was on my mind, I allowed for them

to help me carry it, and the load became lighter. I thought that my emotions would go away eventually if I ignored them, but they didn't because that's not how life works. My peers were my greatest assets, and it was not until I opened up to them that I felt any better. The sadness is not something I'm ever going to be completely free of, but at least now it's not something I deal with alone.

When I think about how I dealt with this process, I regret not thinking about Pasquaney more. Now, fully immersed in this community, I realize that the peer counseling opportunity that saved me during my parent's separation is fully engrained into our experience at camp. At Pasquaney, we have peer counseling twice a week. Our peer counseling is called Circles. It's a judgment free group of your peers that are willing to listen to whatever you have to say. You are given the space to talk about whatever is on your mind. You are encouraged to share openly to a group that is ready and willing to provide feedback, to provide help. As a camper, I appreciated Circles for their depth and what I learned about my peers, but I never fully understood what they were truly giving me. I had the opportunity to tell my peers what was bothering me, to share my burden. Granted, I was always at my happiest at camp and really had no burden to share, but I still wish I had taken the time to appreciate what it means to have a Circle. Because if I had, maybe I would have realized sooner that opening up to my peers was the only way I could be helped when I was at my worst. Now that I am a counsellor, I have the privilege of leading Circles. I believe in letting you guys take the conversation wherever you want, but I hope you realize how special Circles are. In my opinion, they are the most important things we do at camp. I know that to be true now because as I age, I

am realizing that these opportunities to open up to my peers are becoming fewer and further between. They are rare. We have them here, but we might not have them in the future, or when we leave camp. I worry that many of you are failing to realize how special Circles are. Circles are not just a chance to say something funny to get some laughs from your dorm-mates, or a chance to impress your counsellors by saying things you think they want to hear. They are an opportunity to let your friends and peers help you deal with whatever is going on in your life. I hope that if you don't take Circles seriously, you're not just avoiding sharing something that's hard for you to talk about because that's just a wasted opportunity to make it better. Having a Circle of your peers whose only job is just to listen and provide feedback can be one of the most powerful influences on your camp career, if not your life. I can only wish now that I had taken the time to appreciate this more when I was in your shoes, for it could have saved me from a lot of pain. Maybe if I had thought about Circles instead of trying to ignore my emotions, I would have opened up to my peers sooner and avoided the months of feeling sad and alone. If you have something that's bothering you, some burden that you're carrying, share it in your Circle; let your peers help you carry it. You don't have to shoulder it alone. Don't let it drag you down. Let people help you. It doesn't mean you're weak. It means you're human, and we strive together. Take the time to appreciate Circles here at camp; for it is at Pasquaney that you can learn how to let your peers lift you up.