

## Triathlete Finds Way To Honor Sister's Memory

After sister's devastating death, triathlete and her family show uncommon strength and courage

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Some athletes would be devastated to be an alternate on an Olympic team, considering it a failure after the long months and years, really, of training and sacrifice.

For Becky Gibbs Lavelle, it is nothing less than a triumph, a testament to her courage, perseverance and inner strength.

"I was just ecstatic, after everything I've been through," Lavelle said of clinching the alternate's spot on the U.S. triathlon team with an eighth-place finish at the Hy-Vee World Cup on June 22.

Lavelle, you see, got a phone call on Dec. 19 that no one should ever get. Trapped in the depths of postpartum psychosis, Jennifer Gibbs Bankston, Lavelle's sister, her best friend, her twin, had killed her 7-week-old son, Graham, then turned the gun on herself.

Instead of withering in their sorrow and anguish, though, Lavelle and her family were determined to salvage something good from their tragedy. They've started a foundation, Jenny's Light, to draw attention to perinatal mood disorders and, they hope, spare anyone else their pain.

"She's just been amazingly strong. This inner strength, I don't know where she finds it," said Brian Lavelle, Becky's husband and a fellow triathlete. "She knows that Jenny would really, truly want her to be happy and to keep chasing her dream.

"She's living in a way that honors Jenny."

An All-American swimmer at LSU who became a professional triathlete after college, Lavelle missed the 2000 and 2004 Olympic trials with injuries. Last summer, she found herself too low in USA Triathlon's ranking system to even qualify for the six-woman pool that would compete for the three Olympic spots.

But after a whirlwind of races in Europe and Canada, Lavelle had jumped high enough to secure the sixth spot. At a World Cup event in Beijing last September, the first Olympic qualifying event, Lavelle finished fourth.

There were two more events to come, one in April and one in June. Her two best finishes would count.

Then came that phone call.

"The first few months, I guess January I wasn't doing much of anything. It was hard to do anything," Lavelle said. "It was just consuming every thought."

Lavelle and Bankston were inseparable growing up in Minnetonka, Minn., so much so that when Lavelle was offered her scholarship to LSU, she told the school she and her sister were a package deal. After college, Lavelle moved to San Francisco and Bankston, who had met future husband Chip Bankston at LSU, stayed in the South. The couple moved to New Orleans where Chip Bankston went to medical school, then to Birmingham, Ala., for his residency.

But even with a country between them, the sisters' bond remained strong.

"They're completely opposite on the outside, but they had this connection," Brian Lavelle said. "We joke how Becky married Jenny's personality and Jenny married Becky's personality. Chip and Becky are kind of mellow, low-key, and Jenny and I are the more type-A personality."

Jenny had Graham last Nov. 1 and, 10 days later, Becky flew to Birmingham to spend time with her sister and nephew.

Jenny was exhausted, and frustrated over the struggles she was having with breast-feeding. There were some tears, too. But every new mother goes through that, Lavelle and her family assumed. The "baby blues" would pass.

On Dec. 19, Jenny bought a handgun, shot Graham and then herself. Chip Bankston found their bodies in the backyard.

"All I remember saying is, 'This can't be true,'" Lavelle said. "I just couldn't believe it."

Perinatal mood disorders, anxiety, depression, psychosis, etc. affect 10 to 13 percent of pregnant women, with the number jumping to 13 to 20 percent of women after they give birth, said Birdie Gunyon Meyer, the president of Postpartum Support International.

They affect women of all ages, whether it's their first child or fifth, and cut across all races, cultures and socio-economic backgrounds.

"(Jenny) had a lot of things going for her. It wasn't like she was a bad person or unsuccessful," Lavelle said. "She was positive, upbeat. She was successful, talented, creative, successful in her job, had a great job, a great husband.

"It makes it so profound that something like this could happen to her."

It doesn't have to, Meyer said. Perinatal mood disorders, even psychosis, are treatable with therapy and medication and support.

But most women go untreated. Few even recognize they have a problem, and neither do their loved ones.

"It's a mental health issue, and we still have a lot of shame and guilt around mental health," said Meyer, a nurse who has a master's in psychology and counseling and is coordinator of perinatal mood disorders at Clarion Women's Services in Indianapolis.

"When I say to women, '20 percent of women get this,' they look at me dumbfounded. They think they're all alone."

And in the worst cases, like Jenny Bankston's, they feel there is no way out.

"I think, 'Gosh, we talked about everything, how could she not tell me about this?'" Lavelle said. "She was ashamed to admit the feelings and didn't either want to burden me with them or thought it was so wrong how could she possibly be feeling them.

"It was all part of the disorder."

Said Meyer, "There's a sense of hopelessness. They don't really ever feel they'll be OK, and they just can't come out of that funk. That's what they'll tell you afterward, the ones who survived. 'I didn't think I'd be OK, I saw no way out.'"

The deaths left Lavelle and her family devastated. The Olympics? That was the furthest thing from her mind in the weeks after Jenny and Graham's death.

Slowly, though, they all began to heal. The family created Jenny's Light, hoping to not only draw attention to perinatal mood disorders, but to be a resource for women and a catalyst for further research and education.

Lavelle also resumed training.

"I slowly started to do a little bit here and there, a short run, a little swim," she said. "I slowly started to realize that helped, it cleared my mind. It was a gradual process where I started to get my motivation back.

"Also, I know Jenny would want me to continue training and racing. To ultimately make the Olympic team, she would have been so excited."

But there was another hurdle. The second qualifying event was in Tuscaloosa, Ala. It wasn't Birmingham, but Lavelle had to fly into the same airport she had any time she visited her sister.

The same airport they'd flown into for Jenny and Graham's funeral services.

"It was a really bad situation, having that race in Alabama," Brian Lavelle said.

Said Lavelle, "I just really felt her absence, even there. Her husband was there and a lot of her friends."

Lavelle finished seventh, ending her chance at making the Beijing team. It was a bitter disappointment, not just because she didn't make the team, but because she felt she'd let her family down when they desperately needed something to be happy about.

In the weeks afterward, though, Lavelle felt as if a weight had been lifted. Training got better, and she began focusing all of her energy on earning that alternate's spot at the event in Iowa.

With two laps to go, Lavelle was 10 seconds behind the woman she had to beat. By the time her husband saw her on the third lap, Lavelle had not only caught the woman, she was now 14 seconds ahead.

When Brian Lavelle saw his wife appear on the long straightaway of the final lap, the emotions of the last six months overflowed.

"I've only cried twice in my life for happiness: Our wedding day and this," Brian Lavelle said. "The men's alternate was devastated, but Becky was overjoyed because for her, it was an amazing accomplishment.

"It was a very exciting day and a pretty emotional day as well."

As the alternate, Lavelle will accompany the U.S. team to its training camp in South Korea. But she knows her Olympics will end there unless someone gets hurt \_ something she doesn't wish on anyone.

Simply to get where she is after where she and her family have been, well, no medal can match that accomplishment.

"There's definitely something every day that I think, 'Oh, Jenny would want to know,' or, 'I've got to tell her.' Because we would talk about anything; 'I found this shirt at the store,' just little things. It was nice to have someone to tell those things to."

And maybe, because of Jenny's story, some other woman will live to have those conversations with her sister.

"If we could save one person," Lavelle said, "it's all worth it."