About four years ago, a tragedy came upon my older brother’s life. He lost a friend, Stu, someone he would study with, talk with, and just hang out with. As his sister, I did what I could to help him through, but it wasn’t until I matured and entered the art of journalism that I felt I could truly help him honor his friend. I wrote the initial feature story that published in The Daily Evergreen newspaper in one sitting. Then, when I decided to reflect upon my experience reliving my brother’s and his friend’s sister’s pain, I wrote this non-fiction piece within a day or two. While I learned a considerable amount about writing on a sensitive topic, I also learned about how passion for a story can allow for the creation of powerfully interwoven words. I had a passion for telling how Stu’s tragedy changed the lives of those he loved. I hope to never have to write of a loved one’s anguish again, but I now understand how my words offer a voice for those who may need one.

Every morning, I pick up the paper. Sometimes the headlines read, “Tuition hikes hurt students”, and sometimes they read, “Playful puppies help charities”. I’d like to say the feel of the print between my fingers and the smell of the fresh ink drive my habit, but really I hate the black smudges that end up covering my hands and indubitably streaking my face. No, I reach into the jaws of the newspaper box and yank out the publication just escaping the snap of the door’s metal, because I’m a journalist. Like a drug addict gets a high off of a hit of marijuana, holding a newspaper in my hands sends a wave of adrenaline coursing through my veins, focusing my mind on consuming the latest news information.

As a news reporter, I’ve covered budget situations that would
send dedicated accountants into early hibernation, cupcake decorating charity fundraisers, and management screw-ups that have cost strapped students precious dollars. However, the stories dealing with death make me second-guess my choice of employment. Sitting at my laptop, screen open to a blank Word document, I breathe in the air others no longer can. The ink that dries in the final print article may not have a literal existence, but I am tasked with bringing to life the stories of those who have died.

I once watched a gifted reporter with whom I work, crumble in the newsroom. Stoic, respectful, and patient, she had spent the day walking in the shadow of a family who had recently lost their son to an alcohol overdose. Back in the nearly empty newsroom, she sat down, transferred the family’s pain to print, and then cried. She proved herself to be human. And just days after her story ran, I proved the same fact for myself.

“Hi, is this Brooke Robertson? This is Christine Rushton, Cameron’s little sister.”

“Hi Christine. Yes, this is Brooke. Cameron told me you were going to call. I hope I can help with your article,” she responded with a certain confidence in her tone.

“I think you will. Did my brother kind of tell you what the article is about?” I hesitated slightly on the phone, trying to gather my bearings.

“He mentioned that a student had died at WSU? I looked up the news reports on it and saw it was because of alcohol. Cameron said something about you writing a story on Stu. Something about telling what happened to him and who he was?” On the phone, Brooke was surprisingly willing to talk. The article I had asked to write was meant to profile her brother, Stuart, and explain why he died in his junior year of college and what his family has gone through during the three and a half years following his death.

“Yeah, we are trying to put together an alcohol and drug series here at the paper, and I had hoped to talk with you about how Stu’s death affected your family. I’ve talked with my brother about it, and I know from a sister’s perspective how it affected him as one of Stu’s closest friends, but I’d like to help our readers understand what these tragedies do to families.” My mouth seemed to move slowly as each word formed. My professors had taught us to treat some interview sources like deer in a meadow; don’t spook them by coming out full force. I had to focus on feeling around the pond’s edge to make sure if I stepped out on to the ice I wouldn’t find myself through a hole and drowning in a pool of insensitive words.

“When Stu died, I was angry. This…this irresponsibility with alcohol and drugs and partying, this has to stop. People don’t understand they aren’t invincible, and it isn’t just their lives they end, they steal their families’ lives, too.” Despite not having the ability to see Brooke’s eyes, mouth, hands, any part of her body that could unconsciously reveal the pain Stu’s death caused her, the passion in her voice told me that even three and a half years after the accident, she still holds him at fault for ripping his life from her own.

Head tilted, phone pinned against my shoulder, my fingers moved furiously across the keys of my laptop, trying to catch every word Brooke spoke. I dared not pause for fear of missing even one word she uttered about her brother.

Unsure of where to start questions in this delicate interview, I settled on a simple request: “Tell me about him. Tell me what happened. Anything you want.”

I think I was sixteen when my brother made that call from
college. My mom was really quiet on the phone, and I remember watching the emotion drain out of her face. It was like watching a balloon slowly shrivel and finally come to rest on the floor in a blob of helpless rubber. Out of respect for the privacy I sensed this phone conversation needed, I climbed the stairs to my room and sat on my bed’s edge. I waited.

Awhile later she explained to me that one of my brother’s friends had died after falling off a cliff. Stunned, I didn’t respond at first. Then I asked the logical question: “How?”

“They’re not sure. Maybe a little later, would you mind calling your brother?”

“No, but mom, what do I say?” At that age I’d experienced a few R-rated movies and the usual deaths on the television, but I’d only attended one real funeral, my grandfather’s. I didn’t know how to react to death.

“Just let him know you’re there. He doesn’t need advice or suggestions, he just needs to know his family is there for him always and whenever he needs.”

It was then I began to understand how people in a secondary position to death could function. I cried a bit for Stu and his family, but mostly the tears that fell were for my brother. My brother and the pain I knew he must have felt.

Knowing he faced finals for school the following week and even though my faith in the Christian God was not as strong as the years before philosophy and science entered my brain, I prayed. For him, I prayed. For the family, I prayed. For Stu, I prayed.

“Stuart died on Saturday morning early in the morning the weekend before finals week of his junior year of college. He was found at around 5:30 in the morning by a pedestrian on that highway who thought maybe he’d been hit by a car. Police came, found the body, picked him up; he was wearing basketball shorts, didn’t have his wallet, ID, nothing was on him.”

Brooke shared her brother’s story so bluntly. It was as if she was reading the police report verbatim to me, and I remembered the words of warning my brother had said when he gave me her phone number for this interview: “She doesn’t hold back anything.” Had I slowed my tapping fingers to re-steel my nerves, I would not have heard the horror she recounted.

“Dallas, who was his freshman and sophomore year roommate, the party Stu was at happened to be at his apartment. He had been calling my brother for hours afterward. No one had seen him at the bar; they couldn’t find him. Dallas was driving around to find him at 7:30 in the morning; he drove down from his house and saw an ambulance and tarp on the ground. He texted my brother right after that, ‘You need to fucking call me right now, I just saw something really scary.’ Dallas called the cops and filed missing persons report, which is very rare when you’re in college and can’t find a friend. While he was speaking to the officers describing my brother, they said maybe you should come down here.”

Ten minutes, fifteen minutes, thirty minutes; the clock must have moved, but other than the presence of a dull ache in my tilted neck, I took no notice. Brooke spoke as if she were shaking with anger. Word after word she punched the syllables, articulating every letter with the same sting she must feel every time she remembers her brother. She told me about driving to Pullman with her parents, meeting with Stu’s friends to demand the truth, and learning that his death was all because of alcohol and irresponsibility. She told me about driving the moon night after night, about her mom’s inability to talk about the accident, and about how she changed her career path to take on the job Stu had intended to pursue.

Stu had attended college to study winemaking, and his family had bought a vineyard in anticipation. They supported
his ambitions. They wanted to be a part of his dreams. Now, the vineyard, which is named after him, memorializes Stu’s life.

Brooke said she is pissed off at how her brother left the world. She is angry she is doing the job meant for him. But, as year after year goes by, she comes closer to accepting his death and her life.

I could almost hear the anguish melt out of her voice as she shifted toward describing her brother’s hobbies. He was a gifted skier, cross-country runner, and student. My own brother, Cameron, described Stu as great comic relief because they could always count on him for a good story. And what I drew from Brooke’s words was that no one should ever lose a person in their lives because of something as stupid as alcohol.

“He was my other half, he was the other part of me and that’s gone. That will never come back.”

The interview with Brooke must have lasted 45 minutes, but it wasn’t until I set down the phone when I realized tears were streaming down my face. Like a hurricane wave crashing into the beach, the emotions I had held back during the conversation slammed into and washed over my body. Enveloped in isolated silence, I stayed in the office and cradled my damp face in my propped hands. I let it happen. I hate crying, but I let it happen.

Despite having spent the last near hour thinking of questions, more filled my mind. What would it feel like to lose my brother? Was he there at the party? Did he try to stop Stu? Did he know he needed to? What if it had been him instead of Stu?

Finally, wiping away the drying, salty solution, I drew in a shaky breath and entered the newsroom. Covered in blotchy red marks and sporting stylishly puffy eyes, my coworkers halted their jokes and scanned my face, all eyebrows furrowed in concern. I attempted a wavering smile, sniffed to clear my nose, and said, “I just finished the interview.”

My editor in chief, although shorter than my already squatty five-feet-three-inches, managed to engulf me in a bear hug. As the reporter who covered the student death, the one that sparked my desire to revisit the tragedy my brother experienced, she knew the splotches covering my cheeks came from enduring the pain of another. I smiled weakly, let out a small sigh, and said, “People are going to listen to this story.”

Two seconds later, as I reached for my phone to call my brother, it started to buzz signaling an incoming call. Glancing down, I saw the number for my brother’s phone flashing. Yet another tiny smile spread slightly on my lips as I scurried out of the newsroom and put the phone to my ear.

“I was just going to call you!” My voice quavered, my vocal muscles still struggling to gain control of my tone after crying.

“Are you crying?” He laughed a little, not yet knowing the situation, but out of a habitual effort to cheer me up regardless of my mood.

“I just finished my interview with Brooke Robertson.”

“Oh…How did it go? She made you cry?”

“No, she didn’t make me cry. It was…the thought that it could have been you. I couldn’t stop thinking, what if it had been my brother who had fallen and what if I had been the sister going through all of this? It sounds silly, but it’s the truth, okay? As for Brooke, she’s very…blunt. Her honesty was a little shocking at first. She literally walked me through every single detail.”

“That’s Brooke. I warned you, didn’t I?” I could tell from his serious tone and avoidance of my hypothetical scenario that the subject was not one he enjoyed bringing up. However, whenever he shares his feelings, or rather, whenever I manage to squeeze any semblance of emotion out of him, his honesty reflects truth.

“Thank you. Thank you for allowing me to interview her and talk about this situation. Can I ask you a question? Did you know
all of this? All of what Brooke told me? Were you there at the party?” I wanted desperately to pelt him with questions about how he managed the loss, but resorted to treating him like the deer in the meadow. I value his trust and work hard to never betray it.

“Yes. I was there. I know everything. He was one of my closest friends and he was...he was the guy you could always count on to make you laugh.”

Knowing he had to get back to work and knowing I needed to spit out what I felt no matter how silly it may have felt, I took one more deep breath and said, “I just need you to know...I just need you to know that I love you. Everything aside, I’m glad I have you as my brother.”

And the response I knew was coming, came. “Yeah, I know.”

When it comes to our sibling relationship, my brother and I have battled with fists, with words, and occasionally with squirt guns. But, when the bickering over who ate Dad’s box of cereal ends, we know our bond is one never to be broken.

Eyes open, laptop charged, and a steaming cup of now English tea beside me, I wrote Stu and Brooke’s article in two hours. As my fingers pattered away at the keys and the mug’s liquid gradually drained, I thought about my brother and Brooke. I thought about their pain, their lives now, but also about the joy Stu brought to their separate worlds. The words flowed, smoothly carrying the story downstream until it reached the ending sea, a place to finally be set free.

It published a few days later with a photo of Stu running a race, just as his talents allowed. Brooke and my brother thanked me for writing the article truthfully and without an angle, and it was then I realized I did nothing but tell a story. Although my name is on the article’s byline, I am only the vessel that delivers the words from one mouth to many eyes. Often a challenge but never a burden, my job demands I listen, type, and relay what a story always requires: honesty.

I am a journalist. I do not create the news or stories I write. I share the adventures, hopes, dreams, ideas, and tragedies of others. I live for the news and I write for the individual. And tomorrow morning when I wake up, I’ll pick up a paper and learn what the new day has brought.