Running Through the Pain
Suzy Favor-Hamilton, Survivor and Olympian

By Michelle Lynn-Gust

To the majority of viewers who watched the Olympic Games coverage from Sydney Australia, Suzy Favor-Hamilton was simply the woman who fell in the last 150 meters of the 1500-meter final. But for Suzy and other suicide survivors, her fall resonated much deeper than any physical ailment.

In a sense, the fall was the culmination of Suzy’s attempt to cope with her brother Dan Favor’s suicide on September 9, 1999. The death changed her life in ways she couldn’t understand until returning home from Sydney.

“I was upset [when he died], but I was training for the Olympics so my focus was still on the Olympics,” she said in a phone interview from her home in New Glarus, Wisconsin. “In my head, I thought, I have to keep training. My brother died. I have to do this. I can run and do really well and honor him. I thought the better I did, the more I could honor him and the better my family would feel. Maybe I could make all the pain go away.”

She continues: “It’s silly thinking, but in my head, that’s how I was dealing with his death. The running for me really blocked everything out. I would go in my world and train, train, train. That was my outlet.”

Suzy, 32, finished second in the 1500 at the U. S. Olympic Trials and was considered a medal contender at Sydney. She made it through the preliminary rounds into the finals, and even led going into the final stretch. But in the last 150 meters, as other runners passed her, she found herself on the ground. She managed to get up and finish the race, not knowing what had happened or why. Later, she would discover that she was severely dehydrated.

“This is the first week I realized I put all this pressure on myself to win because I thought that was the only way I could honor my brother,” she said, three weeks after that night in Sydney. “That was so much for one person to carry on her shoulders. It’s a good stepping stone to realize my brother wouldn’t have cared which place I got in the Olympics.”

Dan was 37 when he jumped from a nine-story building in Wausau, Wisconsin, where he had convinced a janitor to let him in and watch the sun rise. Suzy had been training at the University of Wisconsin, in Madison, when she called her husband Mark to chat, only to fine he had been called away from work. When she finally reached Mark at home, he told her the news.

Her brother, the oldest of the four Favor children, had suffered from manic depression the majority of his life. Five years separated Suzy from her brother—Suzy is the youngest with sisters Carrie and Chris in between—bust she has fond memories of her childhood with him. Dan liked to tease his youngest sister, but he also allowed her to ride on his motorcycles with him.

“I always remember him being this daredevil; always taking me out in the country and going really fast,” she says. “He had this great adventure side to him. Just his need to be on the edge.”

But Suzy acknowledges there are some sad memories because of Dan’s illness. There were shock treatments and a stream of doctors as her parents sought to help their son. She also remembers his paranoia and his childhood habit of opening and closing doors or continually straightening things. Fifteen years ago he was put on medication.

“It’s hard on the family to see all this going on, especially at a young age. In my own little world I tried to block everything out and that was my way of not dealing with it. And running was such a big part of my world that I could just go for a run and it would take away everything,” she says.
Indeed, Suzy's life revolved around running. She was a top prep runner before leaving her hometown of Stevens Point, Wisconsin, for the University of Wisconsin. After winning 11 Wisconsin state titles as a high school runner, Suzy added nine NCAA championships and 23 Big Ten titles to her resume. A three-time Olympian, she is also a six-time U.S. national champion and only one of two American women to run under 4:00 in the 1500-meter run (3:57.40 in 2000).

After going to college and then moving to California with her husband, Suzy says she only saw her brother on holidays. They talked on the phone when they could: They had their own lives, making steady communication impossible.

Recently, however, when Suzy and Mark moved back to Wisconsin, she began to draw closer to her oldest sibling. They shared a love of art and dogs. They also emailed constantly.

“I feel like I was the closest to my brother the past few years,” she says. “I saw him about a week before he died. My parents and I went up to his house for a picnic. My last memory of my brother is I gave him a big kiss on the cheek and told him I loved him.”

Dan’s medication caused him to gain about 40 pounds in the last year. He had been very conscious about his appearance, so Suzy knows he didn’t like the way he looked. “But right before he died, he looked really good. He was biking ten miles a day,” she recalls. “It didn’t surprise me [that he was in good shape] because I knew he had it in him. I was thrilled for him. He was so happy.”

But neither Suzy nor her family knew that Dan had stopped taking his medication. Nor did they realize Dan was caught in a downward spiral he couldn’t reverse. He would die by suicide a week later.

Suzy says she now knows that Dan must have felt strong enough to cease taking his pills. But once Dan stopped, he had no concept of the path he was on. Neither did she.

“I honestly didn’t understand his disease until after he died and I did research to answer some questions in my mind,” she says. “It’s been a real strong need for me to educate people about the signs. There are real dramatic signs people will show when they are off their medication and he was showing every one in the book. We just didn’t know.”

Immediately following Dan’s suicide, Suzy says she was filled with the “Whys?” all suicide survivors know so well. Although she has immersed herself in research, she is also at the point where she feels she can ask more questions about Dan’s death; questions she didn’t think were appropriate to ask until this time.

It was at the funeral, she says, that she knew her life had changed. “I had this overwhelming feeling of compassion. It was this gift my brother had given me. He was telling me to be compassionate toward people. I wanted to hug everyone. I told myself when I felt that at the funeral, I would never let it leave me.”

And she’s found people, right down to the strangers sitting next to her on airplanes, to listen to her story. She also credits her family and Mark, her husband of nine years, for their help. “I’ve had an overwhelming amount of support so I’ve kept talking,” she says.

Then, there’s the artwork. Suzy has a bachelor’s degree in graphic art; Dan was an artist as well. Suzy had purchased a panting from Dan two years ago, and she’s pleased that it’s in her possession.

“After his death, I dove into my artwork and I couldn’t stop,” she says. “Again, it was my way of dealing with it; I was doing something he loved. Art has always brought me so much happiness, so this was a connection to be close to him. He has just inspired me.”
But, most importantly, Suzy has begun to learn the hard lesson all suicide survivors must endure: to let grief run its course. “After the [Olympics] race, I was so upset,” she admits, having thought she could change the world with a win that would have honored her brother. But through talking with her husband, she began to see what she could realistically do. “I realize now I can make a difference. Maybe it will affect some people. And that’s what is really important.”

She has plans to work with a sports psychologist about issues concerning her running and Dan’s suicide. But now that she’s able to see how she was hurting herself, she feels she’s ready to move on. Perhaps all the way to Athens in 2004, when she’ll have another chance to win that elusive Olympic medal.

“I didn’t want to let it out for some reason but since I did, I feel so much better now,” she says. “For me, it’s been little steps. And maybe in two months I’ll realize something else and a couple of months later I’ll realize something else.”

As only a survivor of suicide understands.