

## Lighting the Darkness

I believe in the power of a smile. No matter how well we know a person, sometimes a smile is all it takes to make that person's day better. That's a lesson I learned at a fairly young age – one of the few good results of a family tragedy.

Life is tough. That's just a simple fact. Yet, few of us can contemplate living with depression. For some of us, depression exists only as an unseen sickness that affects a few unfortunate people. Sometimes, families don't spot the signs of depression in a loved one until it's too late.

I was only 7 or 8 years old when we heard that my cousin Elizabeth had shot and killed herself. A time of grief and pain followed. I vividly remember the funeral, standing by the grave, holding onto my Aunt Karen who had been Elizabeth's godmother. I've never cried as much as I did that day. Though many questions went through my head, the one I most wanted answered consisted of one word: why? I didn't know what had been going through my cousin's mind that tragic day, and I could only assume she had been sad or upset. I wondered what could have been done to make her feel better. I knew that a smile from someone always cheered me up. Perhaps that was the answer. A simple smile could give someone a reason to keep going in tough times.

I started smiling at everyone whenever I could. Some people thought it was strange, but I didn't care. I didn't want anyone else to suffer as my family and I had. I remember one short conversation I had during band practice with a baritone player named Melissa. I had cheerfully said hello to her and smiled. Seeming tired, as though she'd had a long and trying day, she asked me, "Why do you smile so much?" I couldn't tell her my whole past, so I chose the simplest answer I could. "Why not? You never

know when someone may need a smile.” I now had a motto to use as one of the driving forces in my life. I smile because I want to make people feel better. Even when I’m not in the best of moods myself, I try to be cheerful toward everyone around me. Also, I’ve found that helping others cheer up actually makes me feel better as well. Knowing that I may have lightened the darkness of someone’s life gives me every reason to keep smiling. And that’s why I believe in the power of a smile.