

One More Time: A Tribute Podcast to My Mom

Act Three

By: Meghan Bowman

Meghan: When I was a freshman in high school, I was always late. In fact, I even won a special award that said I'd be late for my own funeral.

One morning before school in September of 1999, I was running late as usual and ended up missing the bus. My mom had to drive me to school. A few hours into my day, I was called into the front office. The vice principal and guidance counselor met me at the front desk. I was confused. My initial thought was what did I do? But then they told me my mom had been in a car accident. And it was bad. And she was at the hospital.

After she dropped me off at school late, she decided to head to the studio. While sitting at a stoplight, a man on his cell phone was not paying attention and ran into the back of her going almost 55 miles an hour. She said she heard the screeching of him trying to brake but there was nowhere for her to go. Before the crash. She had just enough time to pull the emergency brake and grab her head to try and protect her neck. That caused her lower back to bulge out. The impact of the crash caused a small explosion in her thoracic back. This accident is something I've struggled with for many years.

For a long time, I blamed myself for her accident. My thought was that if I had been on time, she wouldn't have been there. She wouldn't have gotten hit. None of this would have happened. And she'd probably still be here with us today. I am 15 minutes early to everything now.

Welcome to One More Time: A Tribute to My Mom. This is a three-part podcast dedicated to the life of Gloria Jean Gil. She was a dancer, wife, daughter, choreographer, adjudicator, and business owner. For two decades she ran a dance studio in St. Petersburg, Florida, that counts hundreds, if not thousands of students who came through her doors. But above all, she is my mom.

This is her story and the story of the lives she touched. I'm Meghan Bowman and this is Act Three.

A few months following the car crash, Mom had a massive hours-long surgery at Shands Hospital in Gainesville. Her surgeon was the same one who operated on Christopher Reeves after his horse accident in 95'.

The car accident was the catalyst for everything that would transpire for the next 20-plus years. Mom said the doctors “fileted her open like a fish.” And for the most part, they did. She had a 12-inch scar in the shape of an “L” on her back. When the surgeons cut into her, they pulled each of her organs out to work on her spine.

She had unbearable swelling and pain from the surgery. Doctors prescribed her oxycontin, which was then considered a new pain medication and unlikely to be habit-forming.

But oxycontin was addictive and not as great as the doctors or drug companies made it out to be – it caused an opioid epidemic in the U.S.

In the last few years, courts have gone after the drug companies for the damage it has done to people’s lives. Along with the heavy-duty pain pills, Mom was also on a full gambit of other medications like muscle relaxers, nerve medications, antibiotics, and more that I probably don’t even know about. At one point, she was taking more than 20 different pills a day.

Now, Mom was never quote-in-quote addicted. My dad says she only took what was prescribed to her – and he was usually the one giving her the medicine.

But years of these medications caused a number of other complications for her. She broke her leg multiple times because her bones got so weak that she kept falling. She developed Crohn's disease and near the end, she had stage four kidney failure. But what would eventually take her life, was cirrhosis of the liver.

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The night my mom died was a weird night.

The events replay in my mind like a terrible home movie.

Each night I'd been giving my mom her "comfort medication" – a mix of morphine and lorazepam.

She'd had what nurses called the "death rattle" for a week by that point. That gurgling sound haunts me.

To take our minds off the inevitable, my family and I would sit at the dining room table and play board games. This particular night, we played a card game called "shit happens." How ironic.

Mom got her medicine on the hour, each hour, so at 9:00 I got up and went to go make it. I had to massage her jaw and move her head in a way for the medicine to absorb and not fall out. It took me about 15 minutes.

Tracy, Shannon, and my dad came into the room. My dad wrote notes on his computer, a daily log of mom's progress so he could share it with the nurse the next morning. Every day one of them said it would be her last. That happened at least 5 times in a row.

I crawled onto their bed and laid down facing her, holding her hand while we all talked. I'd been obsessively checking her oxygen levels on her fingers to make sure they stayed in the 90s, I think my dad was getting a little annoyed that I kept checking her, like honestly, what was I going to do to help her if it dropped? I'm not a doctor, and she had a DNR.

Tracy and Shannon stood opposite the bed. Tracy rubbed Mom's head and Shannon held her hand. I whispered for them to grab the oxygen measure to check and see how she was doing. It was at 85, then 75, then 59.

"Dad," I said, "I think you need to come over here right now."

I didn't know for sure, but I knew this was it.

All of a sudden she opened her eyes, yellowed from jaundice and cloudy, she began mouthing something and looked in each one of our directions.

“Momma, momma, it’s ok. We’re all here.”

Tracy and Shannon stood frozen with their mouths open.

Dad pushed his way in between them as she coughed. He grabbed her hand as she took one big breath, then a smaller one, and one more. Her eyes closed and her head fell into the pillow, her mouth open. There were no more breaths.

Her warm hands turned ice cold in a matter of seconds. I just grabbed her neck and started crying. “No, momma, you can’t leave me. Not like this. Please not like this.”

I’m not a quiet crier. I had my head nuzzled into her shoulder like I’d done so many other times.

I heard my dad say, “Meghan be quiet for a second. Somebody get me a mirror!”

I swallowed my pain as tears pooled on her sleeve. A mirror, I thought, why does he need a mirror?

Without hearing me, but understanding what I was thinking, Shannon said, “He wants to see if she’s breathing.”

All of a sudden he stepped back.

“She’s gone guys. Fuck.”

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Although the decline after the accident lasted years, immediately following it she said dance, her one mission in life, was taken from her.

I can relate to that – to an extent. Anytime I’ve walked away from dance, I’ve somehow, always made my way back to it – like a comfort blanket. And for a long time, without dance in my life, I felt lost. For her, it was the same and different.

It was the same because dance was her passion. For her, it was: beautiful, magic, cathartic, healing.

It was different because when I didn’t dance, it was my choice.

For many years I followed in her footsteps. I danced professionally and even opened my own studio. But she came to very few performances. She’d say she was in too much pain, but I think for her, it was too hard emotionally. She grieved the loss of dance as much as I grieve the loss of her.

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A [study](#) on traumatic stress, depression, and non-bereavement grief following non-fatal traffic accidents from the scientific journal Plos One [Plus one] says:

“Just as the rupture in the bond with a loved one due to death can yield separation distress and grief, sudden changes in circumstances brought about by a traumatic event (including a traffic accident) may elicit grief reactions. For example, people may yearn for what is now gone, be preoccupied with memories of what was lost, and experience difficulties accepting what happened.”

She grieved the loss of her ability to dance, which caused a severe amount of depression. She became scared to leave the house. She didn’t want to go anywhere or do anything.

For her, dance was more than her passion. It was her life. And when she lost it, a part of her died. Her accident was the catalyst that started her decline in health.

I said at the funeral that Gloria Jean taught me how to dance. But through those years at the studio, she also taught me to love, to be passionate, to work hard, and that saying the word “can’t” was not an option.

I never attributed a lot of the qualities I have now to things I learned while in the studio - but they're there.

I've always had an uncanny ability to compartmentalize things - to focus when I needed to, to show up when I needed to, and even be emotional when it was time. I thank Mom for this.

One of my favorite lines of hers is - it's not worth doing if it's done half-assed.

Jenny and I pulled it off. Somehow, the tribute tap class came together. Despite technical difficulties not allowing Facebook Live to work. Shannon had more than a dozen dancers in North Carolina, and our class at Jean Lynn's Dance Studio had ten of us. Jenny taught the warm-up and then I took over.

I had them go across the floor with some combos and then we came to the center and learned Gloria Jean's combination to "Joint is Jumping" from her personal, handwritten notes. Megan Sheehan, one of the dancers from the studio, hadn't danced in 24 years.

Megan Sheehan: I was really nervous leading up to today. And I can't believe how quickly that all just came back.

Meghan: Megan started at Gloria Jean's when she was in sixth grade. She met my family at the hotel the day after my mom's funeral. She'd gotten the day wrong and missed it. But her words about Gloria Jean then, are quite similar to how she spoke about her after the tribute class.

Megan Sheehan: She lit up a room. She just had so much confidence and she gave everybody that danced with her confidence. And I was a very shy kid. And I never would have come out of my shell if it wasn't for her. And what she gave you. She made you feel beautiful. It was just amazing. Sorry (sniffles).

Meghan: My brother watched the class through FaceTime. He told me I looked completely in my element. And I was.

My dad said after the class I was grinning ear to ear. I did that too. Tap dance just has a magical power. That no matter what is going wrong, how bad your day has gone, if you put on your tap shoes and sweat a little you're going to feel better.

Meghan (in class): So as she would say, stay on the balls your feet, eyes off the ground, knees bent, heels up. Don't look down here. Nothing good is happening there but our feet we'll tell you if you're wrong. Yeah, cool. Oh, what do you what are we, feeling one more? Who's feeling anyway feeling pullbacks?

Don't all speak at once. I remember when she would have us go from the corner just – go. We're not gonna do that...

Meghan: This class is exactly what I needed. I think it's what we all needed. Phaedra Sheppard drove down from Clermont just to join this class. She was our next-door neighbor growing up, you might remember from Act One that her dad introduced my parents.

Phaedra Sheppard: She raised me. I basically lived at her house. My mother never saw me until I was about 17 years old and went to college. So she was my mother. Gloria was a mother to all of us. Every single student who took under Gloria, she was our mother. And the Gill family shared her with us. And it was, it, She meant a lot to everybody who knew her. And I can't say enough about her. I just can't.

Meghan: It had been a year since I wore my tap shoes. I went full out for that class. I mean, I danced my heart out. All of us did. We danced for Gloria Jean, everyone's mom.

Meghan (in class): Smile! We love tap dance. OK. I bet she's so proud right now. Seriously, like, yes. All right, except that I played “Mack the Knife.”

Meghan: My dad told me after the class, she would have been beyond proud to see what I had organized for her. Gloria Jean would have been proud to see her dancers come together one more time. And tap in her honor.

Michael Gill: Just thinking about all the times I watched the dance classes at the studio. My kids were in a lot of them in the early years and waiting to take my kids home. And Gloria was just such an awesome dancer.

Meghan (interrupting): Dad, do you want to sit out, oh.

Meghan: Caught on tape. That's me asking my dad if he wanted to come in and watch the class. I joked with him after saying I felt like such a little kid because we

rode there together. And it was like, “Gee Dad, can you take me to dance? And dad? Can we stop and get dinner on the way home?”

I'm glad he got to be there. And I'm pretty sure he loved it, even though he didn't participate. But I think the fact that we did the class, for the love of his life, is what made it so special to him.

Michael Gill: I was 10 years older than her. And I was always surprised because she was, is and will always be the most beautiful woman I've ever met. And I was just surprised that she chose me. And what a magnificent dancer she was – just awesome. I mean, I'd never danced a bit. You know? I took, I did take dancing, one summer, clogging, on a bed. Me and a guy worked with, his daughter dance there and we took dancing and we lasted about two months. Said no, I can't do it. But she was just so awesome. So creative.

Meghan: He's right. She was magnificent and awesome. She would have been thrilled that we put this together. In addition, she would have likely been surprised that I was finally able to read her notes and teach one of her dances.

Meghan (in class): Look, I went through a lot of her stuff I honestly don't know how we did it back in the day guys. It's fast. Like to the point where I'm like, oh my god. I'm like, how? Right?

Meghan: We buried my mom with her favorite pair of tap shoes. The ones everybody called magic. Because when she wore them her sounds were truly out of this world.

Meghan (in class): I keep going through her notes. Got like 20 years of them. I literally have a full box and do you remember the Showbiz bags she would carry everywhere? They were like canvas book bags? Full of notes – all on yellow legal pads.

Meghan: For you, it might not be dance, maybe it's drawing, or a sport, or architecture. The point is, if you love something, don't let it go. If you feel passionate about something, hold on to it and share that love with others. Because you really never know just how far your impact goes.

Meghan (after class): I feel like my mom made sure this happened because I was very nervous. That, you know, I didn't know what to expect. Are people going to

show up? Are they not? And the fact that we had North Carolina going, and so many people came here today. I mean, I'm elated. And I'm out of breath. And I realized, how old I am, for sure.

It's been a year. And it's been really hard to put my shoes on since she passed, and I think this kind of pushing me in that direction. Yeah, it'll have to happen more often. Because I do, I love it. This is a part of me just like anything. It's, it's part of my soul just like her. So it was. Yeah, I felt I felt her spirit today.

Gloria Jean Gill: Hello, thank you very much for coming. These are my these are my good-looking dance students. I have a few people that I need to thank. First of all, my daughter, who has taught some, some really good classes this year. And she looks just like her dad, this is Shannon.

And my assistants, Amy Ardelean, isn't she gorgeous. Tiffany Snyder (Tiffany Hope), Amanda Wilcox (Amanda Cappellini), and Megan Sheehan.

And on this side of the stage, we're still going to remain married. This is my husband Mike Gill.

Out in the audience somewhere. God bless you, Sherry Snyder. Thank you very much for coming.

Meghan: The One More Time podcast would not exist without the help of a few individuals. Thank you to my husband and family for your support in making this happen. Sending up big thank you to Wayne Garcia, my professor, editor, and personal cheerleader who helped me put this whole thing together and helped me realize this wasn't something I should do, but something I needed to do. Thank you to Ander Cárcamo-Arpaia for getting awesome sound during the tribute tap class. Thank you to Ben Consigli, without whom my podcast would be completely soundless. He took an idea and ran with it. Many, many thanks to Jean Lynn's Dance Studio in St. Petersburg, Florida. And the owner, Amy Martin, for hosting the tribute tap class and being absolutely wonderful. Thank you to Jenny Geiger for helping me pull that class off. She led the warmup and made sure we had the space – it truly could not have happened without your help.

All writing and producing was done by yours truly, Meghan Bowman. From the bottom of my heart, thank you so much for listening. Now, go give your mom's a hug.