

INTERVIEW WITH A SURVIVOR: TIM

David Lester

This case was the focus of:

Lester, D. (1989). Suicide in a middle-born child. *Adolescence*, 24, 909-914.

Esposito-Smythers, C., Jobes, D. A., Lester, D., & Spirito, A. (2004). A case study on adolescent suicide. *Archives of Suicide Research*, 8, 187-197.

David: What happened to Tim at the time he killed himself?

Jane: He had been away for two days on a camping trip with some friends of his. He was due to come back in the afternoon or early evening of the night that he died. I received a call from my mother-in-law late that afternoon. Tim's father has a country place outside Jonesboro, Pennsylvania. Tim and his friends had gone up there and vandalized the place. They had ripped it to pieces; torn up things that would have no real value to anyone but his father. My mother-in-law happened to be going there, and she walked in on them. The boys ran away. She notified the police. Then she became apprehensive and remorseful, and she thought that maybe she shouldn't have notified the police, so she called me. I told her that she was right to do it. Then Tim called me on the way home, and I said to him, "I talked to Nanny and I know what happened." I worked nights at the time, and I said, "If I'm asleep when you get home this evening, you wake me because we are going to talk." He said, "Yes, all right." When I woke up that evening, my other children told me that he had come in, had something to eat, borrowed my foster daughter's car, saying he would be home early and not to bother me. He would talk to me later. I went to work, and I knew something was wrong. That is the only way I can put it. The idea of suicide never entered my head. Never. But I knew something was radically wrong. I called the police, and they told me that they could not look for him until 24 hours had passed. But they said if Tina, my foster daughter, would declare her car stolen, then they could look for him. I called her up and told her to do it. She said she wouldn't. They have a very close and loving relationship. She said there was a reason. He'd had a flat or something. She wouldn't do it. I said, "You've got to." She did. She had an apartment adjoining mine at that time, in a rural area with lots of trees, and there was a parking area. She had a souped-up car. It had decals and flags and everything. So the police came to the apartment to interview her. This was about one o'clock in the morning. She described her car, and they said "Well, that car is in the parking lot." She said, "It can't be because, whenever he parks my car, he brings me the keys." "Well it's there." And she said, "Something is wrong." She went out with them, and they found him. He had taken a piece of garden hose and threaded it from the exhaust through the window.

David: How old was Tim?

Jane: He was 17.

David: And the thought that he was going to kill himself never entered your mind?

Jane: Never.

David: He never talked about suicide?

Jane: Never to me. I found out later that, to several of his friends and his older brother, he had said that he had considered it, (these are not his exact words, of course), that it was the ultimate answer, that if things got to where he absolutely couldn't handle them he'd get out of it. It was the ultimate running away because nobody could bring you back.

David: But he never mentioned that he had thought of killing himself to you?

Jane: No, never.

David: And he had never made any suicidal attempts before?

Jane: Never.

David: Did he leave any note?

Jane: Nothing.

David: Where did he get the garden hose from?

Jane: Well, we had a garden hose.

David: He got that from the house, and then he came over to borrow the car?

Jane: Yes. Apparently he had gone out for a while. I understand he did go over to see his girl friend for a little bit. But he had come back.

David: Did you find out whether he had mentioned his intention to his girl friend?

Jane: No. She was totally stunned.

David: At the cabin in Jonesboro he was with some friends. Did you talk to them at all?

Jane: No. They weren't coming near me. All of his friends rallied round. I had an extra fifteen children. But those two never came near me. I can understand that.

David: So it really came as a surprise to most people?

Jane: Yes.

David: Maybe you could tell us something about what Tim was like as a child?

Jane: Well up to the age of about eleven, he was a super sweet child, very sweet, very loving. Totally dominated by his older brother. His older brother led him around by the nose.

David: How much older was he?

Jane: Two and a half years. He really led him around by the nose. They were like the Chief and the Indian. Everybody adored him, and he was just sweet and lovable, a little chubby cute kid. Then when he was about eleven he shifted into high. He started getting into all kinds of trouble at school. But it was nothing but silly trouble, cutting up, silly trouble. Then we moved up to North Jersey. I think he was about eleven. And then he started really getting into trouble. He set a couple of fires, he vandalized quite a bit, and he began to steal. When we would ask "Why? Now just tell my why," he would say, "I don't know." And I honestly believe he was telling the truth.

David: This all started just before you moved, and then it got worse?

Jane: Yes.

David: Is there anything that happened around that time?

Jane: No. We loved it up in North Jersey.

David: Did Tim have any younger brothers or sisters?

Jane: Yes. He is the middle of seven.

David: So there would have been a succession of children being born.

Jane: Yes. And they were right close together, all of them. There were seven in nine years. They're all exceptionally close, including him. The times those kids lied for him!

David: So that all his brother and sisters were born by the time he was twelve?

Jane: Yes.

David: You mentioned a foster daughter. You had foster children?

Jane: No. That is just a term we used. She was grown when she came to live with us. She was a co-worker of mine. She was in her early twenties. She had come from New York and had been staying with her sister, and it wasn't working out. She missed her parents, and yet she liked it down here. So I said, "Come and stay with us." She wound up staying for several years, and then she got her own apartment right next to us. She is in her late twenties now. I have a little cottage, and she lives right next to us. The children always introduce her as their sister.

David: It's a very close friendship?

Jane: They were close to each other. She had a lot of emotional problems, and I think that's one reason that they understood each other.

David: So at the age of eleven he started changing. What did he do before you moved?

Jane: Well it was just silliness. Like the teacher would go out of the room and come back and find him tap dancing on a desk. Sticking bubble gum where bubble gum didn't belong. Silly childish things. Like "Look at me. I'm going to make you laugh. I'm a clown."

David: But it was kidding around?

Jane: Yes. It wasn't any real harm. It was a nuisance more than any thing else.

David: Then after you moved it began to get bad. What did he set fire to?

Jane: Once, there was some type of entertainment going on in school. He went to it with a bunch of others, and they went outside during an intermission. He lit a spill or something and tossed it under a parked school bus. Apparently somebody managed to put it out just before it was going to take the gas tank up. He had no idea what would happen. He was just being stupid. Another time, he set a fire in a classroom. They were doing something with rubber cement, and the teacher had the imprudence to leave the room for a minute. He set fire to that. He swore on a stack of Bibles he didn't do it. But he did. Then another time, riding home from school on the school bus, he and another kid just carved up the whole back seat. Of course, we got the bill for that. Which was only right.

David: So most of his destruction was of objects outside the home? Did he destroy things at home?

Jane: Not unless he was putting his brothers through the wall. He made rather large holes in the wall.

David: But usually it was external problems outside of the home?

Jane: Yes.

David: So the night that he killed himself, when he had been up at that cabin and he had taken it apart, was that the first time he had destroyed something that belonged to a relative?

Jane: The only other thing he did to a relative. My brother had a coin collection. It was a big bottle, a liquor bottle, and it stood about this high. He kept coins in it. Tim appropriated that. He got found out and paid it all back. That was the time a relative was involved. He got caught all the time. Just before he died, the father of a girl was redoing her bedroom, and he had been putting aside money a little at a time so that he had about one thousand dollars on hand. Then he was taking the money and buying the things that he needed. She was telling Tim how pretty her room was. I don't remember whether she took him in and showed him or whether she told him. But at any rate her father kept the money in a

desk. Tim went in there (this was just a day or so before he died), pried open the desk, took nothing out of it, and went out the window. They know it was him because, if you please, he left his knife with his initials on it. He wasn't stupid. It had to be saying something. We tried so hard to find out and we failed.

David: Did he steal from shops?

Jane: He stole anything from anybody, everywhere. You couldn't sit your purse down. You couldn't sit your billfold down. You couldn't sit your cigarette case down.

David: Did he steal money?

Jane: Yes.

David: Did he steal things that he needed or just anything?

Jane: It was anything. For example, I was doing some work in the house with some wood. I was carving this piece of wood, and he said, "You are going to tear your hands up with that. I'm going to see if I can find you something that would be better." A day or two later he brought me this wood-working tool which was really nice. I just said, "Thanks." If I had thought about it, I would have thought he had bought it. He had jobs here and there. He earned money, and he was generous. I never even thought about it. It turned out he had lifted it from school. So when that was brought home to him, I shook down his bedroom and pulled the other things out, and we took it back to school. I said to him, "Why?" He said, "Well, I thought you could use it." I said, "If I wanted one bad enough, I would go out and buy it. It was nice to have, but not to the extent that I wanted you to steal it. If I wanted it bad enough, I could have scared up five dollars and got it."

David: So he stole generously, to give to other people too?

Jane: Yes, and he stole for himself.

David: Did he have enough money that he didn't have to steal if he needed those things?

Jane: Oh yes. He always had jobs. He did beautiful wood work, he did gardening. Anything he turned his hand to he did well.

David: Were there any other behavior problems he showed beside this stealing and destruction?

Jane: A great deal of violence. He had immense mood swings. They were like that (snap). They swung one way, and they swung the other and, when he was in a rage, you had just better get out of the way. He would lay you out. He didn't care who you were or what the situation was. He thought the world of his younger brothers, but they got put through the wall and he really let them have it.

David: Can you identify the kinds of situations that would make him angry?

Jane: Anything. Here is one example. His older brother was using my car for some errands and he parked where he isn't supposed to park. The policeman asked him for the registration and license. So he pulled out the registration I had in the glove compartment and went into his billfold for his license. It wasn't there. Luckily the policeman was nice enough to accept his word. "I have got a license; this is my mother's car." He didn't make any fuss. But my son was really upset. He said, "I really don't know where that license went. I know it was in my billfold, and I'm really upset. I could have been taken off to jail." Which was true because he was a long-haired kid. We had a shake down all over the place. We asked Tim, and he didn't have any idea where it was. One of my younger sons said to me, "I bet I can tell you where it is." I said, "Where?" "Go under Tim's mattress." We went under it, and there it was. He had been using it. He was a big good-looking kid and had been using it for proof to go into bars and get drinks. I talked to

him. I didn't always talk to him quietly. I talked at the top of my lungs half the time. But this time I talked to him quietly. I said, "You know this is really something else. It's not only an illegal thing you are doing, but it is a pretty darn rotten thing you're doing. Your brother could have been carted off to jail." He said, "I know," and he double talked his brains out. Finally I turned him loose. Before I had my back turned on him, his brother went right through the wall. There was a hole in the sheet rock.

David: He attacked the younger brother who had told on him? You said his moods would swing. What other moods did he show?

Jane: I have a hair trigger temper myself. We would be yelling at each other, and in the middle of things (he would be cussing me up, down and sideways), in mid-yell, he would say, "Mom. I love you. I love you." In mid yell. I honestly don't think he knew why any more than the rest of us. There were times when I was so desperate I said to him, "You tell me what you want and I will get it for you. I don't care what it is. I don't care if I have to buy it. I don't care if I have to take another job to get it. I don't care if I have to bribe a politician. You tell me what you want and I will get it for you." He couldn't tell me.

David: Did he show much depression in his teenage years?

Jane: No.

David: He was relatively happy?

Jane: No. I can't say he was happy. He was usually on the rampage somewhere.

David: What do you mean by that?

Jane: He was an excellent driver, but when he got in a mood, he drove like an idiot. He would get into fights for no reasons. Not just at home, anywhere.

David: So what would he do on a typical weekend or in the evenings? What were his interests?

Jane: Breaking in somewhere.

David: Did he have a social group that he hung out with?

Jane: Oh yes. They were odd. They were spooky. They disappeared in and out of the wood work. They were odd. They were a couple of nice straight-forward kids, but they didn't last long as friends.

David: Do you think that his friends were similar to him? Did they break and enter?

Jane: Oh yes. A lot of them have been in a lot worse trouble since Tim went. We were all hoping that, maybe as ghastly as his situation was, it might bring somebody up short. But it didn't. Just for a little while. At his funeral all these kids turned up, except the two he was with at the cabin. They were all at his funeral, these hoods, all dressed up. They were starched and combed. It would break your heart. They all came up to me and I thought, "Come on. Think. Don't forget this. Think about this. Look at that coffin. Look at it." You wanted to shake them and say, "Look at it. There but for the grace of God." I think it straightened them out for about for or five days. Like a heavy smoker always says, "The other guy will get lung cancer." I don't think they could conceive of it happening to them.

David: Looking back, do you see his behavior a result of the crowd he was with?

Jane: I can't say that. I never have been one to believe that he led her astray, she led him astray, they led them astray. I figure if you're going to do something, you are going to do it. If you don't want to do it, you're not going to do it. You will find people to do this or that with you if you want company, whether it's breaking and entry or sitting and reading the Bible.

David: So you feel that he chose those friends as his friends because they were the ones like him? Was he ever violent toward you?

Jane: Oh yes. He chipped the bone in my wrist one time. I can't remember what the situation was about. It must have been fairly trivial or I would remember. But it degenerated into a battle of wills. I said, "You will." He said, "I won't." He would up letting my wrist have it. He was totally devastated.

David: In a situation like that, as soon as he hurt your wrist, would that end the emotion?

Jane: Yes. He was horrified.

David: Was he violent toward his father too?

Jane: No. He was twelve when my husband and I separated.

David: So he hadn't been violent up to that point?

Jane: Well, yes. But he knew he couldn't lick his father. The time would have come when he would have been able to. If we had been living with his father at the time he died, he and his father would have had it out over the tables and over the chairs. I know it. But at the time there wasn't much he could do about it if his father chose to lay him out.

David: Did he and his father visit?

Jane: Once in a while. He had planned to stay with his father one time. His father was remarried by then. A much younger girl. Tim liked her very much. One of the reasons he and his father tangled was because he objected to his father's treatment of his wife. She is a very tiny little thing, and they were all out raking. He said his father was barking out orders at Susan like a sergeant. I asked, "Was he rude to her?" He said, "No. He wasn't rude. He was speaking very affectionately, but he was saying pick this up, lay that down, shift that here. You know what a peanut she is. Finally I took the rake out of her hand, spun her around by the shoulders, shoved her in the house, close the door, picked up the rake and continued to work." I asked, "What did Daddy say." He said, "Daddy asked me what I thought I was doing. I said, in case it slipped your mind, that's your wife, not a pack mule." They had a verbal argument over that.

David: Was his father a violent person?

Jane: He could be.

David: When he punished the children, did he beat them or hit them?

Jane: It depended on which child. He had favorites, and Tim was an unfavorite. My husband is a fantastically brilliant person. Very brilliant and very creative. One thing where he was like Tim is the mood swings. Terrific mood swings. He was usually on top of the world or down in the dumps. First, there was this project and then there was that project. Everyone was expected to fall in with the enthusiasms and drop them when he did. It was difficult to follow him at times.

David: You said Tim wasn't one of his favorites. Was Tim a special target?

Jane: Yes he was.

David: Can you give me an example of how his father picked on him?

Jane: Tim was supposed to be stupid and clumsy. All kids are stupid and clumsy at times. When the older boy and Tim and his father were doing something together, Tim was the gopher. When he was younger he loved it. "I am helping Daddy." But then he got to realize that he wasn't doing any of the fun part, and it bothered him.

David: It sounds as though his father might have put him down verbally?

Jane: Oh yes. A lot. But I can't point to that, because there are so many people who have bad relationships with a parent but come out fine. You just can't say, "His father picked on him, therefore."

David: His father didn't show the episodes of violence that Tim showed? Losing his temper? Getting into a rage?

Jane: Not to that extent. Not for small reasons. He had a violent temper. But usually you knew what triggered him off. With Tim you didn't know what triggered him off. Just a few days before he died (I didn't learn this till much later) Tim was working on Tina's car. (That was the car that he died in.) He was doing something to it and he needed a tool. He went over to my brother to borrow it. So my brother was helping him work on the car. Tim said, apropos of absolutely nothing (they weren't talking about anything personal other than what was the matter with the car), "I can't tell you how I despise myself." My brother said, "Why?" He said, "Because everybody forgives me. Everybody gives me chance after chance, and I spit on them. Mom, whenever I do something stupid, screams, yells, throws a tantrum, bounces things off the wall, and then she pulls herself together and gets me out of it. She helps me. She's only one. Dozens of people have done it. And I spit on them, and I don't know why." Then he started to talk about cars. My brother told me that quite some time after Tim died. So apparently the idea of suicide was germinating for sometime.

David: Was there anybody that Tim wouldn't act violent toward?

Jane: My mother. That's about it.

David: What about Tina?

Jane: No. He never would. He nicknamed her the Puerto Rican cannon ball, because one night he got arrested. (One of the many times.) He called up her house instead of mine. (I wasn't home anyway. I was working.) She drove out to where he was to get him out of jail. He claimed it was for loitering, but I think there was a little more to it than that. I never did hear, because that was shortly before he died. But she came out and got him. He said they had him handcuffed to a bench. Now, like I say, I think there was more to it than loitering, because you don't handcuff a vagrant to a bench. Tina is a very quiet, very gentle girl. She never raises her voice. He said she blew into that police station like a Puerto Rican cannon ball. She flew up to him, grabbed him and said, "What have they done to you. You get a key, and you get him out of here." She ripped the whole station apart. He said that was the only time he had ever seen her lose control of herself. She's very quiet, repressed, too repressed. They got along great.

David: Was he violent toward his sisters as well as his brothers?

Jane: He had been on occasions. The girls spoiled him rotten. Not very often but, when they did come down on him, he would back down.

David: Before that last time you saw him, before he took off for the cabin, or a couple of days before, can you remember what he was like?

Jane: He told me he wanted to go away for a couple of days with his friends. I said, "Sure," and I think I gave him a few dollars, what I had. Then I packed up a bunch of food I had. All the kids liked canned stew. I gave him several cans of that, and what else I could spare. He had a sleeping bag and a few things. I said, "Give me a call," and he said, "O.K.," and that was the last time I saw him.

David: Did he seem in his usual mood?

- Jane: Yes. He said to me, "We might stop by and see Dad." So I don't think they had planned vandalism, because he wouldn't have told me where he was going. For all his father called him stupid, he was plenty smart. He took his senior year in high school in three months and graduated at age sixteen. He crammed with a learning center because he was bored. He didn't like school. So I said, "You get your diploma and I will get off your back."
- David: In the days before he went off for the trip, there was nothing to indicate to you that things were getting worse for him? They weren't getting worse or better as far as you could see?
- Jane: No. There wasn't anything to put your finger on. Of course, everybody has a good case of hindsight. We are all very good at that. You think of all these little things. He did beautiful wood work, anything around the house. If I wanted something done, I asked him and he would do a beautiful job, always. I bought some tile for the floor, and it had to be set a certain way to make the pattern come out right. He was going to put it down, and he had just hadn't gotten around to it. He would have, very definitely. He hadn't gotten around to it. He always used to say he was going to see the world. He wanted to go around the world and come home and stick with me and take care of me. I said, "Yes, if I let you grow up. I may head for Tanganyika myself." It was like a joke between us. So he was off somewhere, one afternoon, and my younger son (who was at that time about eleven) said to me, "I want to lay the tile." I hated to tell him no, but I spent some money on that stuff. I said to him, "I will let you start but, if you make one mistake, you're going to have to stop because I paid too much money for this." He said, "That's fair." He started laying. He was going great guns and doing an absolutely beautiful job. We heard Tim outside, and he said, "Oh boy. I'm going to have Tim look at this." So he ran out, and he grabbed Tim. He said, "Come and see what I did; come and see what I did." So Tim said, "Hey. You've been laying the tile." The younger one, Joe, he said, "You check it out Tim. You look it over carefully because Mom wants it done right. It's important to her. She paid a lot for it." He got down on one knee and looked along the seams, and he really hammed it up. Finally, Tim got up and he said, "That's beautiful. You couldn't have done better. It's a really good thing, because Mom will always have you to help her." That was the first time he had ever given any indication that anybody other than himself was going to be the one helping me later on.
- David: And looking back on that...
- Jane: I just thought it was very cute that he catered to the little one's desire to be praised and so forth. I thought that was cute. But looking back on it I got a big case of hindsight.
- David: Were there any more episodes like that, because you mentioned a conversation you had with your brother?
- Jane: Well the only one I can think of was actually that night that he died. I was still asleep, and he told the kids not to wake me up, that he would talk to me later. My younger son told me this. It had been my birthday that day before. He was away camping. All the kids gave me a little surprise party. They made a cake and gave me presents. Tim wasn't there. Tim was always the one that got something special for me. They all gave me nice presents, but he always made kind of a thing of it. He would make something or build something. He did such beautiful wood work. My younger son told me "Tim came in and heated up the macaroni. I made a big pot of macaroni that was in the refrigerator. So

he took some macaroni and he ate it. I sat down and I was talking to him. He was telling me about camping." I guess he deleted quite a bit. "I said to him, Tim you should have been here last night. You missed a lot of fun. Tim said, 'I did. Why? What happened?' We gave Mom a party for her birthday, and it was really nice. Tim looked at me, and he said 'Oh wow. Her birthday.' He finished eating and he went out and asked Tina for the car." Now I don't think he killed himself because he forgot my birthday. But he had never forgotten my birthday. I mean, nothing was preventing him from going out and getting something later. But it is just all these things. As I said to the kids then, when I had to come back from the hospital and tell them that he was a dead on arrival there, they all said, "Why didn't I do this, and why didn't I do that?" And I said, "Company halt. Let's stop right here. No one is allowed to if, because it is the stupidest word in the whole English language. No one is allowed to if. If any one was going to if, I should. I am his mother. No one is going to do it." I honestly think the reason he killed himself (I believed it then. I told the kids then. And I believe it now) was that he just said to himself in effect, "I can't stop whatever this is that is driving me. I'm hurting people. I'm going to hurt them worse. I am going to stop." I honestly think that's how it was. I really do.

David: And nobody was to blame?

Jane: Oh, definitely. If anything, I was his mother. Those kids were so good to him. They really were. Too good in lots of ways.

David: What was the effect of his suicide on the family? Did it have an effect?

Jane: I don't think it made any changes, other than -- this is going to sound absolutely horrible. Horrible as we all felt, much as we missed him and the terrific load of guilt that we were all under (in spite of the fact that we realized intellectually that we weren't guilty; emotionally you will never feel that you are not guilty), it was almost a relief. For years, every time the phone rang or I heard a siren, I would lose my stomach. Ask not for whom the bell tolls. I generally was right. It was the police coming to the house. Or the police were on the phone. It took me a good year to stop reacting like this to a police siren or a telephone call. I remember being out in a car just a few days after he died and hearing a police siren. After my initial reaction, I said to myself, "All right. You're safe now. You're safe." I must say that I have absolutely nothing but praise for the police. They gave that kid so many chances. I could never holler police brutality. Never. They were so good and so understanding. Too much in some ways. I said, "Listen. Take him out in the back lot and work him over if you feel like." Really fantastic. But I still had that feeling that he was safe. I think we all did.

David: We are talking as if Tim was the problem child out of the seven.

Jane: He was.

David: The other children never showed....

Jane: No. I got a couple of pains, but no.

David: When psychologists write about families, they often say sometimes there is one person who...

Jane: Is a scapegoat?

David: Right. When that person no longer is there, then somebody else becomes the scapegoat. That hasn't happened?

- Jane: No. I do not like their life styles, but they have done nothing that hurts anybody. They're their own worse enemies. As far as my relationship with them, they have always been perfect. I really don't know.
- David: Did you ever have any theory about why Tim developed this way? It is as if it was some compulsion that he couldn't control. It started around age eleven. Did you ever think that there was something physiologically wrong?
- Jane: I hoped it really. That sounds like a stupid thing to say. But it would lift such a load of guilt. My husband, or their father, has radiation sickness. He told me a couple of years ago, when he knew he was developing symptoms, he said to me, "I have been reading up on this. There isn't a heck of a lot I haven't read about this. I read that the children of people with this (apparently it's very cumulative, he has been working with this since he was eighteen, since he was in college) they are very prone to certain types of physical diseases. First of all, it's more men than women, more boys than girls. They have a lot of urogenital problems, prostrate and so forth. Much more than the average. They are much more prone to psychological and psychotic reactions." I said, "If I could believe that (I know this sounds absolutely horrible) but if I could say this was something that we couldn't help, oh that would be like....." But of course you can't. You can't. That's just too easy. That's too big a cop out.
- David: And yet it sounded as if there is not much that you could have done differently.
- Jane: Precisely. I could have tried to hold my temper a little more. But looking back on it, I would just reach a point where I would be so devastated that I think, if somebody had held a gun to my head and said, "Shut up!" I couldn't have.
- David: Did Tim ever show any other symptoms beside the behavioral problem? Did he show abnormal, strong fears?
- Jane: No.
- David: Was he a bed-wetter?
- Jane: No.
- David: Any other kinds of symptoms of emotional problems? You mentioned before that you had made some attempts to try and get some help for him. What kind of things had you tried?
- Jane: We took him to a psychiatrist, and the psychiatrist gave him tests (you draw a person, a house and so forth). Tim told me he took to him right off. He was supposed to be the best for adolescents in mucho miles around. He said he showed low self-image, but didn't show destructiveness or anything. Of course, this was about three years before he died. I'm very bad about time. Three years, I guess, because it's four years this week that he died. He said a very low self-image. He talked to him, and he worked with him a little. He said to me, "You are going to have a fantastic man here." I said, "Am I? If I live." He said if we could just kind of bear with him. "You are going to have a fine man there," he said. "I really don't think he needs counseling." Then I took him for months and months to the children's psychiatric center in Pomona, which is good. Then we had counseling through the school. You might as well as have saved your breath to cool your porridge.
- David: How did he respond? Was it usually your idea to seek out a counselor?
- Jane: I would suggest it, and he would go right along. "Yes. If you think so Mom. If you'd like to, OK." In fact, at the children's psychiatric center, he paid for it.

David: He paid for it?

Jane: Out of money that he earned. After a certain point he said, "Mom, this is stupid." I said, "You're right. This is stupid." We just weren't getting anywhere. This sounds like I'm pointing the finger, and it's not so. I don't blame anybody. I am his mother, and I couldn't do anything. Nothing helped.

David: And he felt he wasn't getting anything out of counseling?

Jane: Right. The one who he really responded to was the psychiatrist, and the psychiatrist said he didn't really think he needed day-to-day or week-to-week counseling. So that was it.

David: So Tim himself was never resistant? You said that sometimes, early on, he would deny that he had done particular things?

Jane: Always. Look you right in the eye and lie.

David: Were there times when he would sit down and admit that he had done these things?

Jane: Only when he was totally pinned to the wall, when his finger prints and his shoe prints and his coat with his name on it were there. You were saying "Look now. You did it." Then. But not one split second before.

David: And then, would he admit it that he had a problem, that he needed help?

Jane: Not really. Just that he didn't know why. Or he would have some totally ignorant reason. Like the time he got that wood chisel for me. "You were messing up your hands with the one you were using."

David: The problem is that teenagers in general are not the kind of people who would sit down and talk about their problems. Most teenagers are not that reflective, at least on the outside, about their behavior.

Jane: Especially not to somebody of another generation.

David: Right. So one wouldn't really expect him to sit down and say, "Look I have this problem."

Jane: No. In most cases, no. Of course it does happen sometimes.

David: I would think that teenagers are perhaps the most difficult kind of people to help.

Jane: I would imagine so.

David: Was there anybody that he had talked to more? Like Tina or one of his brother or sisters? Or had he been closed from all of them?

Jane: I don't think any of them really saw a complete person, including myself. I don't think they did. Some saw a better side of him than others.

David: After somebody kills himself, often the members of the family feel some stigma, as if the neighbors are looking at them...

Jane: Oh no!

David: You never felt that?

Jane: No never! We were never allowed to feel that way. There were just too many loving people.

David: So you got a lot of support from other people?

Jane: Everywhere.

David: And you yourself have been willing today to come and talk to me.

Jane: How is our time here? I want to tell a little something that will digress, that will give you an idea. I am a nurse and I believe very definitely in organ transplants. I wished a million times that something could have been salvaged from Tim. But of course there wasn't. He was a DOA. I wished so many times there was something that would have

made it less senseless. About a year and a half ago, my sister, who is much younger than I (she is the age of my oldest daughter) she and her husband lost a young child. A congenital heart problem, kidney, everything wrong. He died following open-heart surgery. When they knew there was no hope, just a day or so before he died, they said, "Where do we sign? If there is anything that you can take from him, if there is anything you can do (we know you can't save him) that will teach you, do it. Don't tell us about it. Just where do we sign?" So he died, and a matter of hours after he died my sister was on the phone to me. I was crying my eyes out. She was on what I can describe only as a high. She was euphoric. She said to me, "Guess what?" I said, "What?" She said, "Dr. Smith said to me that they couldn't use any of John's organs because there was too much damage, too immature. But he told me that, because of what they learned from John, they will save the next one. Guaranteed! The next one will live and be well. Isn't that fantastic?" Well, I was crying my brains out. I said, "Does it sound stupid to say I envy you?" She said, "No never. Never, never, never does it sound stupid for you to say that." Now to me, this type of thing, this is my organ transplant. This is my autopsy. This is something to make it a little less senseless. If it touches one person who can help another person, one that's all. That's all right.

David: To help alert people to the problems and to sensitize them. That's a nice idea. Specifically, if you think back, is there anything you could advise or tell a parent who has a child that's a problem? What should they do or what shouldn't they do?

Jane: No.

David: You said that maybe if you could have held your temper back...

Jane: No. I really don't. I can't give one tiniest bit of advice. Not one. For all I say, "I should have held my temper," because we should all hold our temper, there were many times when I did hold my temper. When I said, "Now you tell me. Ask and it shall be given. I'll do it. I'll get it. I'll buy it. I'll obtain it. I'll arrange it. Whatever will take this compulsion away from you. If you want to go around the world on a tramp steamer I'll find you a ticket. Anything." I did hold my temper, but I accomplished just as little as when I screamed, yelled, and bounced things off the wall.

David: After all, you were yourself with your other children.

Jane: Yes. They got things bounced off the wall on them a few times too.

David: Right. It really is a difficult problem to know how to deal with the adolescent, and certainly the unhappy or the disturbed adolescent.

Jane: It is that. Right now, I have two boys at home. They are fifteen and seventeen. One is in high school and one is in college. I don't ever have to think about them. What are they doing? If they are out late, I never even think to check. I never think to ever get nervous. Never. Because if they are late, they will be home a little later. They are never up to any thing. They are little stinkers. But I don't have to worry that the cops are going to bring them home in a hammer-lock. I don't have to worry that they are hurting anybody. I am sure that beer and cigarettes enter into it. But I don't worry. I have thought so many times, "How odd it is. How different." I was a nervous wreck whenever I opened my eyes, and he wasn't right in the room.