

'MAKE PEACE WITH TRAGEDY'

MAN WITH ALS SHARES STORY OF LOSING SON IN TEDx TALK

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A former Georgetown physician who's paralyzed by a terminal illness recently took to the TEDx stage to share his healing journey in the wake of deep personal loss.

Dr. Jeff Sutherland's talk through McMaster University, entitled "Redefining a Life with Meaning Following Profound Adversity," aims to shine a light on the path forward after a tragedy.

The father of three with ALS shares the heartbreak of losing his 21-year-old son Zach and Zach's girlfriend, Kaya, in a kayaking accident on the Credit River five years ago, along with the steps he and his family have taken to bring purpose and meaning to their lives following such immense grief.

Sutherland, who's confined to a wheelchair and is unable to eat, drink, breathe or speak without assistance, was able to tell his story through a computerized system that tracks his eye movements on a visual keyboard and reads out loud on his behalf.

"I hope for those who have not yet suffered profound loss, that it (the talk) increases compassion for those who have. Compassion elicits more acts of kindness toward others," he told the Independent in an email interview.

"For those who have had tragedy enter their lives, I hope that our story gives them the knowledge that it's possible to make the choice to make peace with tragedy, and even eventually move forward with a new sense of meaning. If I can do it, I hope that it in-



TEDx screenshot

Dr. Jeff Sutherland says he's received a positive response from those who've listened to his TEDx talk 'Redefining a Life with Meaning Following Profound Adversity.'

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spires others to do the same."

On most days, Sutherland said, he and wife Darlene are able to live in the present and hold their sadness with gratitude for their family, friends and community.

He added they're also buoyed by doing good for others, like honouring Zach and Kaya's lives through a charitable foundation in their names that supports youth who've suffered the loss of a loved one, along with recognizing his own health journey

through fundraising for ALS.

"This advocacy has provided purposes and meaning into our lives and it has made us less victims of our circumstances," he said.

Sutherland released a memoir entitled "Still Life" in 2019, which took his weekly writing that he used to process grief and transformed it into the basis of a manuscript. The 200-page book details his ongoing healing journey and the vulnerabilities of his normally private life with Darlene.

While sharing his family's story in any format is always "so difficult," Sutherland said the time limit allotted for his TEDx talk made it critical that every word and message be precise.

"It also had to express the magnitude of devastation that occurs when a person suffers deep personal loss," he said. "It had to be honest and not 'Pollyanna-esque.'"

To view Sutherland's talk, visit the TEDx Talks page on YouTube.



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