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This kindergarten teacher was fired for being drunk. Three months later, she was dead.

By Matt Driscoll

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Tacoma, Washington

When I pull up to the corn-yellow house with dark green trim on Spokane's South Hill, Tom Bowman and Robin Einerson are waiting for me.

It's a neighborhood where it's hard to imagine anything going wrong: leafy and green even in the middle of Eastern Washington's unrelenting summer — a mix of fired-brick houses, modest bungalows, Craftsman homes and the occasional dignified estate with prominent white columns out front. Retirees and landscaping companies fill the air with the sound of lawnmowers, while mothers in athletic gear push strollers up and down cozy sidewalks.

Robin Einerson and Tom Bowman, photographed at their home in Spokane on Oct. 10. Their daughter Klara Bowman, a teacher at Tacoma's Larchmont Elementary School, committed suicide three months after being fired for being intoxicated at work. Robin and Tom want the world to know there was more to their daughter than her lowest moment. Kathy Plonka kathypl@spokesman.com

Robin meets me at the door. She's cordial, but cautious.

After everything her family has been through in the past year, it's an understandable reception for a member of the media. In March, the couple's daughter, Klara, a kindergarten teacher in Tacoma, made national headlines when she was fired for being intoxicated at work.

Three months later, she was dead.

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Reaction to ‘drunk teacher’ story unfortunately predictable

Tom, an artist who’s worked primarily in advertising, and Robin, a pastoral assistant at the family’s church, will celebrate their 40th wedding anniversary next year. They’ve lived in this house on Post Street since 1986, when Klara was 3.

If the walls of their home could talk, they’d speak of joy and love. They’d recall Klara, as a little girl, playing make-believe school, leading classes of imaginary students, and later her little sister and only sibling, Brita. They’d recall the summer camps that Klara organized for the younger neighborhood kids in the family’s backyard.

Using the name of the street she grew up on, Klara called the annual one-day retreat “Camp Post.”

“Just the All-American kid,” a wistful Tom says of his oldest daughter.

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These walls have also seen more than their share of sorrow. As we sit in Tom and Robin’s living room, with Klara’s cats slinking underfoot, the void is inescapable.

In late January 1998, Brita Bowman, then 10, died after an 18-month battle with cancer. Acute lymphoblastic leukemia is the precise medical name for the disease that claimed her. It’s a wound, her parents confide, that Klara — who was 14 when Brita died — carried with her for the rest of her life.

Klara’s story, on the other hand, is one with trauma and addiction at its center. Like roughly 17 million people in the United States, she battled alcoholism. Unlike most, however, Klara’s struggle was very public.

It’s a struggle that ended in early June, when she took her own life. She was 33.



This picture of Klara, left and Brita Bowman is displayed at the home of their parents Robin Einerson and Tom Bowman in Spokane. **Kathy Plonka**
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Overnight pariah

You might remember Klara Bowman's name — maybe even the smiling photograph of her that's now plastered all over the internet, grabbed by a thirsty media during her moment of infamy.

[The story broke March 7](#). Klara — who grew from a child teaching make-believe lessons to a real-life kindergarten teacher in Tacoma — was fired from Larchmont Elementary, removed from her classroom with a blood alcohol level five times the legal driving limit.

Klara's mistake was news for a reason. She was a public employee, responsible for a classroom full of 5- and 6-year-olds. When it was revealed that this was not the first time she'd faced discipline for an alcohol-related transgression while working for Tacoma Public Schools, many parents and observers expressed outrage.

You could tell it affected her. Longtime friend Stephanie Sleeman, on the media's relentless coverage of Bowman's firing

Predictably, media outlets across the country — from The News Tribune to The Associated Press, USA Today and NY Daily News — ran with the story.

Local TV and radio covered Bowman's firing breathlessly, teasing the sordid details — like the number of booze bottles found hidden in her classroom, or how she walked into a wall in front of a class of fourth-graders on her way out — in [a frenzy of detached fascination](#). Online commenters had a field day.

Whether a line of decency was crossed in the media's coverage remains a matter of opinion.

“I begged reporters not to use her name ... even though they had the right to do so,” recalls Tacoma Public Schools spokesman Dan Voelpel. “While her actions meant she could no longer teach for us, she did not deserve to be publicly shamed.”

The impact was immediate. Within days, a Google search for Klara Bowman revealed page after page of headlines about Tacoma's “drunken teacher.”

The night the story broke, her parents and friends say, reporters converged on her small house in University Place, hoping to catch a glimpse and a soundbite.



“(Klara) talked about coming to Spokane, and starting over,” her mother says. “She talked about, ‘Maybe I should just go someplace really far away, where I could just start anew.’”

Photo courtesy of Tom Bowman and Robin Einerson

“You could tell it affected her,” says longtime friend Stephanie Sleeman of the relentless coverage.

“(Klara) talked about coming to Spokane and starting over,” Robin says. “She talked about, ‘Maybe I should just go someplace really far away, where I could just start anew.’”

Still, in the aftermath of her firing, those close to Klara held out hope that she’d find a way to rebound. They prayed that *this* time would be different and that she’d finally found her rock bottom.

Shortly after she was let go by Tacoma Public Schools, Klara went through a 28-day inpatient rehab program in Yakima and for the first time began to talk about herself as an alcoholic who would never be able to drink again — an acknowledgment she had been reluctant to make in the past.

“She was so hopeful. *We* were so hopeful. She’d finally been able to work with some really skilled people to figure out why she’d been drinking,” Robin says of Klara’s trip to inpatient treatment — which, like with many alcoholics, was not her first attempt at sobriety.

In late May, Klara texted her friends and family with what seemed like good news: She’d officially changed her name to Klara Einerson, taking her mother’s maiden name.

In hindsight, friends and family now see the decision as indicative of her struggle to cope with the unwanted notoriety that accompanied her mistake.

“She wanted to move on. She was talking about what she should do next,” says Sleeman. “And, from a practical standpoint, (the name Klara Bowman) was so easy to Google.

“I just thought it was a great idea. Close this chapter and move forward.”

But a week later, Klara was gone.

Today, [Klara's obituary](#) is the top Google result when you search her name.

Like many newspapers, The News Tribune — which learned of Klara's death shortly after it happened — has a general policy against covering the suicides of private individuals. For Klara Bowman, that meant the biggest mistake of her professional career got prominent play in the paper, but when she took her own life — a decision friends and family say was at least in part influenced by the exhaustive coverage her downfall at Larchmont received — it went unreported.

“Nobody deserves to be lambasted like that in the media,” lamented Diana Sailer, a Grant Center for the Expressive Arts kindergarten and first-grade teacher who befriended Klara during her first year teaching in Tacoma. “The story of who Klara was got lost, and the only picture that came out about Klara was that here was this drunk teaching kids.”

Sailer describes the media coverage as “unforgivable.” And she's not alone.

“I think that what she lived through is so bad it's hard for me to imagine,” says Ann Dowsett Johnston, an expert in alcohol policy and author of the 2013 book “*Drink: The Intimate Relationship Between Women and Alcohol*.” “To be publicly shamed ... I'm not sure how you get over something like that.”

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Johnston's book — which details the author's own battle with alcoholism while also looking at the ways alcohol impacts the lives of women — resonated with Bowman, according to Robin.

“I actually see this as a witch hunt,” says Johnston.

“(Klara's mistake at Larchmont) was a cry for help. She was in full-blown addiction.”

From their living room in Spokane, two months after their daughter's death, Tom and Robin say they still resent the way the story unfolded. They understand why Klara's firing was news, but wrestle with the way it was handled and the impact it had on their daughter.

“I said, ‘They're going to pounce on it,’ ” Tom Bowman says of the media circus.

“And they did.”



A picture of Klara Bowman is on display at the home of her parents Robin Einerson and Tom Bowman in Spokane. **Kathy Plonka** kathypl@spokesman.com

A natural

There was much more to Klara Bowman than alcohol, addiction and despair.

She was adventurous and traveled extensively, visiting 39 countries during her lifetime. Like her father, she was an artist; her paintings cover the family's home. She had a passion for hiking and a soft spot for "I Love Lucy." Friends remember her dry sense of humor and her comedic timing.

More than anything, Klara loved to teach. And kindergarten was her calling.

Robin describes Klara as full of energy, creativity and compassion. She tells stories of Klara "scouring yard sales for coats that would fit her kids," because, teaching in Tacoma, some of her students couldn't afford them.

"She couldn't bear to see them shivering at recess," Robin explains.

Like Diana Sailer, Angel Morton met Klara during Klara's first year of teaching at Grant Center for the Expressive Arts in Tacoma. The three educators became instant friends.

"She had a ton of energy, and she just really believed in what she was doing," says Morton, now president of Tacoma's teachers union. "It was not a job, for her."

It seemed to come natural to her. Kids recognize that. They get that. They know when someone's genuine, when you're not faking it. I think that was (Klara's) gift. She was just so genuine. The kids adored her. Grant Kindergarten teacher Diana Sailer, who befriended Bowman during her first year teaching

"It seemed to come natural to her," Sailer adds. "Kids recognize that. They get that. They know when someone's genuine, when you're not faking it. I think that was (Klara's) gift. She was just so genuine. The kids adored her.

"They just thought the sun came up with her and went down with her at night."



Her parents say hiking was one of Klara Bowman's many passions.

Photo courtesy of Tom Bowman and Robin Einerson

Societal problem

To hear her friends and family tell it, Klara Bowman was one of a kind.

“Her sense of adventure was nonstop. She would do anything to have a crazy new experience,” says Elizabeth Warren, who grew up in the same Spokane neighborhood as Klara and last exchanged text messages with her a week before her death.

But in her long struggle with alcohol, she was like many others.

According to Dr. David Jernigan, an associate professor at Johns Hopkins' Bloomberg School of Public Health who's been working on alcohol policy issues for 30 years, we live in a culture that has normalized risky drinking behaviors, and the consequences have been profound.

The CDC reports that excessive alcohol consumption is responsible for an average of 88,000 deaths each year and cost the United States \$249 billion in 2010.

The agency says over half of these deaths and three-quarters of the costs are due to binge drinking — defined as four or more drinks for women on a single occasion and five or more drinks on a single occasion for men.

The CDC reports that one in six adults in the United States binge drinks roughly four times a month, consuming about eight drinks each time. Klara's parents say she began binge drinking in college.

While unsafe drinking habits are largely accepted in our society, losing control is clearly not.

And the story of Klara Bowman is a prime example.

“We live in a culture that normalizes risky drinking, and we kind of blame the person who can't handle it,” says Johnston.

“We throw people under the bus who get into trouble.”



Robin Einerson and Tom Bowman's home is surrounded by painting's by their daughter Klara Bowman. **Kathy Plonka** kathypl@spokesman.com

Numbing the pain

The public learned a lot of things about Klara Bowman when she was fired for being intoxicated at work Feb. 19, including many of the details of her history of alcohol struggles while employed by Tacoma Public Schools.

In 2011, while she was at Grant, an incident Feb. 23 resulted in a last-chance agreement with the district and her reassignment to Larchmont.

But what the public never learned was that both incidents occurred within weeks of the anniversary of Brita's death.

No one — including her parents — believes the timing was coincidental.

“Every January or February, around that anniversary (of Brita's death), Klara went missing,” Sleeman remembers. “I don't even know where she'd go. She would just kind of run away. She ran when things got too rough.

“We always knew when that time was coming, and it happened every year, to the day almost.”

Elizabeth Warren, who grew up with Klara and witnessed firsthand the way Klara dealt with her sister's death as a teenager, describes Brita's death as “definitely a milestone in her life,” and one that marked “a noticeable change” for her friend.

She says Klara coped with the tragedy by filling her life with activity. And while so many outward signs seemed positive — Klara was elected a class president in high school, got good grades and continued to play soccer at a high level — Warren now believes her friend “learned to compartmentalize,” and “probably never learned to really take care of herself, for her own sake.”

Along with turning to alcohol, Robin says Klara battled an eating disorder and depression in high school.

Later, she had trouble sleeping and suffered from anxiety. Over the course of her life, Robin says doctors offered diagnoses and various prescribed medications, but none of it seemed to ease her pain.

Robin now views it as part of a lifelong search for relief.

Relief that never came.

“It was definitely a reaction to (Brita’s death),” says Robin, who acknowledges harboring significant guilt about not paying enough attention to Klara, especially while Brita battled cancer, which included a bone marrow transplant and a lengthy stay in Seattle for treatments at Swedish Medical Center.

“My regrets are, when she was younger, after Brita died, maybe I just wasn’t really there for her,” Robin says.

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Robin Einerson, Bowman’s mother

To experts like Johnston, the details of Klara’s story — including the role the death of her sister played — sound familiar. She describes alcoholism as an affliction that’s often deeply rooted in trauma, isolation and self-medication.

For Tom and Robin, the takeaway is clear.

“She told us that she had her first drink on the one-year anniversary of Brita’s death. And she said, ‘I loved it!’ Obviously, she was saying it’s the only thing that made the pain go away.

“When she found alcohol, and that really numbed it ...”

The grieving mother looks out the living room window and trails off. Meanwhile, friends are left to wonder what more they could have done.

“I think the hard thing for all of us was none of us knew how hard it was for her. None of us understood what was going on beneath the surface,” Morton says.

“She was just a lovely, lovely person who was damn good at whatever she put her mind to, except for supporting herself.”



Robin Einerson and Tom Bowman surrounded by pictures and painting's by their daughter Klara Bowman at their home in Spokane. **Kathy Plonka**
kathypl@spokesman.com

Klara’s last words

Robin got the text at 2:23 a.m. At the time, she tells me, she didn't realize its significance.

I love you so very much, momma.

"That's all it said," Robin remembers of her final message from Klara.

It's hard to picture a scene further removed from Klara Bowman's childhood home than the Century Motel in Kent. It's an establishment where patrons check in through a small, glass-protected window, and the sound of cars speeding past on nearby Interstate 5 is constant. When I tapped on the glass, a skeptical looking woman appeared only to tell me she has no recollection of Klara Bowman.

But it's here, on the second-floor balcony outside the door of Room 210, where Bowman was found unresponsive on the afternoon of June 5.

"I can't even imagine what drew her there," Robin says.

Police reports and documents from the King County Medical Examiner's Office write the tragic final chapter of Klara Bowman's life.

Officers arrived at the Century Motel just before 2 p.m., responding to a call about an unconscious female lying on the ground with no pulse. Hotel management told police that Klara checked in at 2 a.m. and checked out at 11 a.m. No one is sure why she returned to the motel that afternoon, a day when temperatures reached 93 degrees.

Klara was transported to Valley Medical Center and died the following day, after Tom and Robin had traveled over the mountains from Spokane to be by their daughter's side.

"They put her on a ventilator and gave her enough meds to stimulate her heart for us to get over there," Robin recalls.

The Medical Examiner's Office ruled Klara's death a suicide, the result of a lethal combination of ethanol intoxication, over-the-counter medications and prescription drugs.

It's a finding her parents reluctantly accept.

The suicide attempt was not Bowman's first. Her friends and parents say she tried to take her own life on at least one other occasion, after her first alcohol-related incident at Grant.

The Medical Examiner's suicide finding fit with several other "ominous" text messages police said Klara sent prior to her death. Friends woke up to messages including "Done with life" and "Help."

In committing suicide, Klara fell into another well-established pattern related to the abuse of alcohol in the United States.

Dr. Alex Crosby, an expert on suicide prevention in the National Center for Injury Prevention and Control's Division of Violence Prevention, says there's clear consensus that alcohol is what he calls a "major risk factor for suicidal behavior."

According to the CDC's Alcohol-Related Disease Impact application — which uses the best-available scientific evidence to estimate deaths due to excessive drinking across 54 alcohol-related conditions — 23 percent of suicide deaths between 2006 and 2010 were attributable to binge drinking.

I call alcohol the great co-factor, in that it causes such an enormous amount of health and social damage, but it mostly doesn't get noticed, because people die of something else, like suicide, cancer or a car crash. Dr. David Jernigan, associate professor at Johns Hopkins' Bloomberg School of Public Health

"I call alcohol the great co-factor, in that it causes such an enormous amount of health and social damage, but it mostly doesn't get the notice it deserves, because people die of something else, like suicide, cancer or a car crash," says Dr. Jernigan.

Klara Bowman's death is now just such a sobering statistic.

"I have a lot of questions. But I just have to let it go," Robin tells me of her daughter's death.

"That's just the nature of what happened."

Memories live on

Before I head back to Tacoma, Robin contacts me and says she has something she wants me to see.

She says it's important.

On a laptop, set up on the dining room table, she's cued up the 10-minute video that played at Klara's memorial services this summer.

It's a simple production, a collection of photos from her daughter's 33 years of life set to music.

They're songs Klara would have appreciated: the theme from "Peanuts" and "I Love Lucy," and ABBA's "Dancing Queen."

In deciding to share their late daughter's story, Klara's parents hope to inspire difficult — but needed — conversations about how we view alcoholism and addiction.

A family of faith, Tom tells me that they believe Klara will have an impact even after death.

"Our concern is on the big picture. What is life? Nobody gets out alive. What happens afterward, what happens in this life, that's as important to us as how you exit," Tom says.

“I think Klara is still doing good after death. She is being used by a bigger hand than us.”

As the video plays, Robin begins to cry. The images on the small computer screen capture her daughter as she remembers her, she says.

In Robin’s memories, Klara is smiling, laughing, traveling, teaching and loving.

Living life.

“She was not just one of my daughters,” Robin says. “She was one of my very best friends.”

This is the Klara Bowman people who saw her story on the news never got to know.

And this is the Klara that her mother desperately wants people to see now.

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