

## **‘My life was changed 180 degrees’**

**Book, bad news started Askinosie on a journey that altered his soul.**

*By Diane Majeske  
News-Leader*

He was 14 when he locked horns with God.

He was standing beside the body of his father, an ex-Marine and successful lawyer, a fighter who had no business succumbing to cancer at the age of 46.

He couldn't believe his dad was gone, in spite of his prayers, in spite of his tears, in spite of an ironclad spiritual guarantee from the family's prayer group that his father's recovery would be a witness to the power of God.

Then Shawn Askinosie screamed.

“I was begging God to please, please not do this,” he recalls. “I was so angry, I was so afraid. I wasn't ready.”

But Lawrence Askinosie was dead. And his son would wait 25 years to say goodbye.

### **A man redefined**

Everybody knows Shawn Askinosie.

The 39-year-old defense attorney is no stranger to the spotlight, often embroiled in much-publicized, controversial court cases.

But his most passionate cause now is far removed from the bench. It's Lost & Found, an organization he's starting in order to provide emotional support to children who have lost a family member and are working through the grieving process.

There are no judges, no defense, no trial; the only appeals are from children trying to cope with losses that have changed their lives.

“Grief never ends. It never ends,” says Shawn. “You just have to find meaning in life and deal with it ... this isn't counseling, it's support. It's a place where they can talk a little bit and play a little bit and talk a little bit more, and it's a safe and caring environment.”

Yes, sometimes there are tears.

But there's laughter, too, and heartfelt emotion — strange territory, it would seem, for a hard-edged defense attorney known primarily for his ruthless determination and courtroom charisma.

But that was then.

“I've sold businesses, resigned from boards, and tried to do away with the things in life that didn't really matter to me so I could do this,” he says. “I needed to make time for this project. It's hard to explain — it was something I just had to do.”

Because after the big wins and the material success, Shawn Askinosie made a startling discovery. The man he'd become was far removed from the man he wanted to be.

### **A time to reflect**

It's October 1999, and Shawn should be on the top of the world.

But Shawn was empty.

“What I found was at the peak of what society defines as success, I just found emptiness and one more mountain to climb,” he says.

“I always believed that contentment equaled mediocrity, that you weren’t pushing, you weren’t struggling. Unless I was moving forward, I felt like I was moving backward.”

He went shopping that month, that October, for an early Christmas present for Caron, his wife. He picked up a book, “Tuesdays with Morrie,” that he’d heard a little about.

He bought it. Caron read it.

She told him he should read it, too.

In mid-November, he had his 10-year-old daughter, Lawren, read it to him.

The book tells the story of sports writer Mitch Albom and the relationship he rekindles with his former professor and mentor, Morrie Schwartz, who’s dying from amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, or Lou Gehrig’s disease.

Their relationship turns into a class, essentially, not on how to die, but how to live.

“It’s a poignant, touching little book, for anyone,” Shawn says. “But for me in a huge way. Something about Morrie pierced me ... Morrie was not afraid to love, and he appreciated the value of relationships over material wealth and possessions, and he did it in a very simple way. That just struck me.”

It made him think. About his 80-hour workweeks. His definition of success. His future, and his past. He began to delve a little, just a little, into long-buried feelings about his father and grief and coming to terms with losing someone you love.

He even talked about starting a support center for grieving children with counselor friend Karen Scott.

But it wasn’t until December, just before Christmas, that his world truly started to change. He received a call from close friend Ron Carrier, a buddy he’d first met at law school, years before.

Ron called him that day with some startlingly bad news: He had been diagnosed with a brain tumor.

Shawn was stunned. “Every molecule in my body stopped moving at that point,” he says. “I was helpless.”

In a panic, he called Karen, a licensed professional counselor who specializes in grief issues.

“I said, ‘I don’t know what to say, I don’t know what to do,’” he recalls. “And she told me, ‘Shawn, you’ll be better support for him if you deal with the grief issues that you have.’”

He found the idea daunting.

“I didn’t want to open that Pandora’s box; I didn’t want to deal with it. But I wanted to be in a place where I could support my friend.”

### **Looking back**

Karen Scott knew Shawn years ago, in high school, when she was a teacher at Glendale and he was a star debater at the top of his class.

“He was Mr. Achievement,” she recalls. “And that’s a common reaction for a child with grief issues. Part of that is to escape the feelings, and the other part is to prove to someone, maybe themselves, that ‘I’ll be OK in spite of this.’ Achievement isn’t a negative thing, but it can be if it’s driven by negative emotions. In Shawn’s case, in part, it was.”

Over the weeks, she met with Shawn several times.

He told her about his father, a firm ex-Marine turned lawyer who would let Shawn tag along with him to the courthouse. Known for his generosity, Lawrence Askinosie started Legal Aid in Springfield, and Shawn would watch the long lines of people waiting patiently for just a few minutes with his dad.

He talked about his father getting sick, how his mom couldn’t, just couldn’t, give him his morphine pain shots, and how the task fell to him.

He recalled the anxiety, the fear; how he'd watch his dad's chest rise and fall while he watched television, glancing from the corner of his eye to make sure the breathing didn't stop.

And he told of his family's prayer group; how some members assured the teen-ager God would heal his dad, and to talk about death and dying — to even consider it — would be a show of weakness.

So Shawn stayed silent. And his father still died.

Karen had Shawn write a goodbye letter to his dad and read it aloud. She had him study teen-agers, so he could realize what a boy he had been when he'd taken on a man's job.

She had him talk through long-buried emotions.

The sessions, though difficult, offered revelations.

"I had never grieved, I guess, when you come right down to it," Shawn says. "I never allowed myself to go through the process ... it's about allowing yourself to mourn the loss, to talk about it, to resolve the questions you have about it, to be angry about it, to cry about it and ultimately come to a place where you know the grief will never end but you keep it in the proper perspective so it doesn't overshadow your life."

He started allowing himself to feel, to appreciate and study his life and his actions and the man he'd become.

"My life was changed 180 degrees," he says. "I used to tackle every challenge with reckless abandon and thought I was fulfilled emotionally and spiritually by my achievement and material success, and I now know that I wasn't."

"Now, I seek fulfillment by other, more simple measures. I find greater fulfillment in deeds that relate to how I can be a better father, how I can be a better husband, how I can be a better friend, and how I can be a better servant of God."

He's still a lawyer. He still works hard. And he has no regrets about the work he's done.

But that's his job, not his life.

And he doesn't want grieving children in the Ozarks to go through what he did, to spend years not knowing what's wrong.

"I know now that there's a way for children to get help," he says. "And they shouldn't have to wait 25 years to get it."

### **Walking a new path**

The woman who knows Shawn best is Caron, his wife of 14 years.

She's watched her husband's metamorphosis, seen his priorities shift.

"He's changed his soul," she says. "He's changed his whole being. He's a different person, a better person. He finally gets what it's all about. The money, the house, all the trappings — he's realized those are fleeting and all that really matters are your relationships with God, family and friends."

She knows her husband is an often controversial figure, and there are those who may doubt his intentions.

That's OK, she says.

"I just think that if you feel you're doing the right thing for the right reasons, you can't worry about how other people judge you."

And Shawn, for his part, is more than ready to refocus.

"I've found my personal path to peace, contentment and resolution," he says. "Success, to me now, is when you love the people important to you and they love you, and you make people feel special."

"That's success, and I'm working on it."