



## Broadcast Transcript

**Broadcast:** Honoring Elizabeth: The Never Alone Project – Part 1

**Guest(s):** Steve Reiter

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**Dr. James Dobson:** You're listening to Family Talk, the radio broadcasting division of the James Dobson Family Institute. I am that James Dobson, and I'm so pleased that you've joined us today.

**Roger Marsh:** Welcome to Family Talk. I'm Roger Marsh. Hope you had a great weekend and hopefully you spent some time with family or friends and you might even be enjoying today off as it is President's Day. Well wherever you may be, thank you so much for joining us today. We're going to be listening to a story about one man's journey to fight for patient visitation rights and reform in our nation's hospitals here in this post pandemic world. His name is Steve Reiter. Tragically he was not allowed to visit his wife, Elizabeth, during her last days due to hospital policies during the pandemic. Our own Dr. Tim Clinton is here now to tell us more about Steve.

**Dr. Tim Clinton:** Today we have a guest on the program who is working to turn his personal tragedy into hope for others. His name, Steve Reiter. Before we discuss this story, let me tell you a little bit about Steve. He is a podcasting radio and media production consultant and coach. He actually was a part of the team at Focus on the Family from 1997 until 2010, a ministry of course started by our own Dr. James Dobson back in 1977. And then Steve actually served here at Family Talk, Dr. Dobson's current ministry from 2010 until 2012. Steve is now the host and producer of the Holy Smokes Podcast. I like that. And most notably, he's the founder and president of the Never Alone Project. Steve was married to his wife Elizabeth, who sadly passed away in 2020, and they are the parents of two boys. Steve, welcome into Family Talk. Great to have you. Dr. Dobson sends his warmest regards. He has such respect for you. Thank you again for joining us.

**Steve Reiter:** Oh, I love Doc so much, Tim. Thank you so much for having me on. He and I got together for lunch in June and it's always good to hang out with him.

**Dr. Tim Clinton:** I know Dr. Dobson would say, Hey, ask him, Tim, how the boys are doing.

**Steve Reiter:** Boys are amazingly doing well. I'm fortunate in that I had a seed planted that becoming a widower could be my journey very early in my marriage. And so whenever I would work on broadcasts during all those years that I worked for Doc at Focus and Family Talk, something in my spirit would say pay attention.

And so a lot of those lessons that I learned, I made sure to try and pass on to them. And I got them into grief counseling right away. And my mom and I had a conversation like a week ago, and she was amazed at how much they're thriving and how much they've matured over the almost three years since she passed.

Dr. Tim Clinton: Well, in 2020, your wife Elizabeth passed away, and we're here to talk about that journey that you've been on. But Steve, let's go back and tell us how you guys met and tell us a little bit about Elizabeth. What was she like?

Steve Reiter: We met in 2000, back in 2000, Dr. Billy Graham was doing the Amsterdam 2000 conference and they needed some engineers to help run that event. And so Focus lent me to Billy Graham and I spent a month in Europe, and when I got back, I was feeling really good about being single and where I was and I'd done some inner healing work with some counselors at Focus. And so I was like, ah, what the heck? This online internet dating thing was kind of new in 2000. And so I just put an ad up and there was this one girl who no photo, all she said was "Christian girl looking to hang out with Christian guy." And I figured, what the heck? I'll just see what happens. And Dr. Clinton, she sent me a picture and I was blown away. I was like, I need to pay attention to this one. And literally within less than a couple months, I knew that she was the one I was going to marry. She was just so gentle and kind and had a love for God that was something absolutely just beautiful.

Dr. Tim Clinton: Steve, as you were talking, I was thinking about my wife, Julie, and you know how it is when you meet somebody and you fall in love and it just does wild things to your heart and you can't think about much else in life and you set out on this journey together and that story of love is beautiful and God drops in your life as a part of your journey children, and you can't imagine what it's going to be like to have kids. And then you add kids to the equation and you can't even imagine life without your kids. Just Steve kind of marches through that emotional bonding and that closeness and that story of yours because we're setting it up for what starts to happen and this tragedy that takes place in your life.

Steve Reiter: Early in our marriage, Elizabeth started to exhibit some autoimmune issues, and so I tried to be the best husband that I could and tried to learn more about that and try and meet her needs and care for her. But she found out she was pregnant with Matthew on the day that she was diagnosed with lupus and rheumatoid arthritis, and her rheumatologist said, we recommend an abortion because this type of lupus is going to be a significant health risk. She said no to an abortion, but that's the way that it played out. She nearly died while giving childbirth during an emergency c section and it was then that seed was planted that this could be my journey.

Dr. Tim Clinton: Steve, keep taking us down the road here because this continues to unfold and becomes challenging and difficult. Really difficult.

Steve Reiter: Yeah. Tim, I can't tell you the number of times that we would have hospital visits, whether it was pneumonia, autoimmune flareup, or after I had left working for Dr. Dobson in 2012, one year later, she had a pretty bad autoimmune flareup, a pretty bad lupus flareup that was being misdiagnosed, and she wasted away to about 86 pounds and that she was hospitalized in around March of 2014. Well, when she got out, she got better so quickly that some undiagnosed pulmonary hypertension raged. And for listeners that aren't familiar with pulmonary hypertension, it's basically as the heart is pushing blood into the lungs, the lungs aren't accepting the amount of blood that the heart's trying to push in to get oxygenated. And so that back pressure causes the right side of the heart to enlarge and eventually it starts to fail. The heart just starts to fail congestively. Within six months, when she was released from that autoimmune flareup, that lupus flareup in March of 2014 to November of 2014, her heart went from perfect to significantly enlarged and failing congestively.

Dr. Tim Clinton: Wow.

Steve Reiter: And so we were there 24/7. I'd be in there two or three days and her mom would be in there, one or two, and we would be praying over her speaking words of life over her rubbing her feet, casting a vision for our future. And the doctor said, we're blown away that this was almost miraculous in terms of how well she recovered from that. But while she was in there, the doctors told me, "Steve, it's an end of life kind of situation." And then the head of pulmonology who all the nurses said is world renowned as a pulmonologist, he came to me and he said, "Steve, I don't want to be the bearer of bad news, but there's a real possibility your wife's not going to be around to see your youngest graduate high school." You will want to explain that because she now had a Hickman line going into her chest that presented an infection risk and pulmonary hypertension patients average one infection every year.

All right, I'm going to make sure I'm going to do my very best to make sure that I change that bandaging well, that I'm praying over her, speaking words of life over that, making sure I'm sterile, all that kind of stuff. But then he said, "Steve, where we are currently in terms of treatment, eventually our best meds stop working. And the only real cure is a lung transplant and healthy lungs are rare and lung transplants, they're fraught with complications. And so this is really your only ticket out right now. So keep her as healthy as long as you possibly can," which was my goal, because you never know when that next medical breakthrough is going to happen that's going to give more time or eventually cure the disease.

So because she had this long history of autoimmune issues and then this lung issue, we knew that as word was starting to come out of China, that COVID could be something very serious and so if it made its way to the States, we knew we needed to take precautions and do what is necessary in order to try and minimize that risk for her.

Dr. Tim Clinton: Sure.

Steve Reiter: I was in Wisconsin when everything shut down. When the NCAA canceled their basketball tournament, when the NBA paused their season, I was in Wisconsin for the boys' basketball tournament. One of my college roommates is a head coach, undefeated team. They were going to win state and I was going to be there to see it, but as soon as that was canceled, my Elizabeth asked me to come home early from that trip because she thought she had COVID. So I immediately got a flight from Milwaukee back and we locked down. We had friends that were delivering groceries, we had just people taking care of us, making sure that we were able to successfully quarantine while she got tested. And it was negative, but because I had started to exhibit some symptoms, the doctors thought it could still be COVID and so they were treating her virtually. And Tim, you can't diagnose pneumonia or a blood infection over a virtual visit. You can't. I trusted my doctor to know what was best. And unfortunately, she was one of those that fell through the cracks.

Dr. Tim Clinton: She winds up getting hospitalized, right?

Steve Reiter: Yeah. On April 29th after seven weeks of being up and down. Some days she'd be in bed. Some days she'd be feeling much better and be up and around and we'd be playing games at the table, which I'm so thankful that we have those memories. She woke up on April 29th at about 3 in the morning throwing up, not even able to keep a sip of Gatorade down. And it was at that point that we looked at each other and we knew that she needed to go to the hospital. And she admitted after she was in, "Yeah, I would've gone in earlier if they would have allowed some visitation in," but she knew that hospitals were locked down and there were no visitors whatsoever. And so she didn't want to be in that kind of a situation. And so she stayed at home, unfortunately too long. And when she went in, it was a serious case of pneumonia and it was starting to turn into sepsis.

Dr. Tim Clinton: Steve, she's in the hospital and you guys can't see her.

Steve Reiter: Yeah. So when she went into the hospital, she got COVID tested again and again, it was negative. So I got a COVID test as well, and the next day, that one came back as negative and I thought, sweet, I'm negative. She's negative. Clearly we came back from this end of life situation in 2014, doctors and nurses there, they know me. I'm sure her pulmonologist would get me an exemption and I'd be able to be in, and I'd abide by whatever rules they were willing to impose because I saw the power of holding her hand and rubbing her feet and encouraging her and being that second set of ears for the doctors and the nurses when they would come in and ask those kinds of questions, that when she went in, I had never seen her that weak, ever.

Not in 2014 with that end of life situation with the congestive heart failure, not earlier in 2014 with that lupus flare up where she had wasted away to 86 pounds. And so I know having an extra set of ears and eyes not only increases the quality of care for that patient, but it also increases their likelihood of coming home. And so I thought, sweet, I'm negative. She's negative. I have a

great relationship with her doctors. I'll get an exemption. And the answer was no. It was a hard and fast no visitors whatsoever, unless there's imminent death.

Dr. Tim Clinton: You've got two boys at the same time. In the midst of this chaos. Steve, what was happening in their hearts? And they were shut out from their mom too.

Steve Reiter: They were doing okay. I kept asking them. And because they had been through so many different health issues with Elizabeth, this was just another health issue. And so she'll be home no problem. Everything will be fine. And so I tried to protect them as much as possible from letting them know how serious this was. But Tim, I can tell you right now in that seven weeks between when the shutdown first happened and when she went into the hospital, there was something in my spirit. For some reason I was waking, I believe it was God prepping me. There was something in my spirit that was saying, "This is going to be something different." And so I made sure during the course of that seven weeks that we were playing games around the table, that we were having fun. And if Elizabeth was in bed, if that day was one of her down days, I was making sure that the boys, if they were on their device, they were on their device next to my wife in the bed.

Dr. Tim Clinton: Steve, I know a part of the story is that Elizabeth actually began to think that she was going to come home and in the middle of it, this turns. And I know it may be difficult, but can you take us into those final moments? Your last connection, your last moment, really?

Steve Reiter: Yeah. Yeah. We had a couple turns during that 21 days that she was there. So when she went in, I had never seen her that weak. There were a couple FaceTime calls that we would have where I honestly wondered if that was the last time I was going to talk to my wife. And so after she had been in there for about a week, some hospitals started letting visitors in, but University of Colorado Hospital, the Anschutz campus didn't. And so I started to get some media attention around the state and started getting some interviews, some local TV, some Denver papers we're starting to pick it up.

And so I was really focused on that. And so my mom came out from Wisconsin to take care of my boys. That way I could focus on trying to get into the hospital and raise awareness about this issue. And so we're getting ready to head up to Denver, and I think, "What is the least harmful thing that I can do? Do I just drive up and drive by because I'm driving right by the hospital?" You can see it right there from the highway. "Do I drive by and drive back without acknowledging or do I head up a little early with the boys and we get some dinner and we sit outside the hospital and FaceTime over dinner with her and then wave to her from the car?" Because I thought maybe that would encourage her.

So we had dinner, FaceTimed, we stood outside and waved and her nurses flashed the light so that way we could see which room she was and we waved to her. And at the end of that, at the end of that call, she got really emotional

because we were so close and yet we weren't able to give her a hug. We weren't able to hold her, we weren't able to hold her hand. And every time my wife would go through some kind of big emotional thing, her health would traditionally dip. And sure enough, that night at about 2 in the morning, I got a call, "Your wife is bleeding in one of her lungs. We're moving her into the ICU. Don't come up."

A couple hours later, I got another call. "We think we've isolated it. It's a couple small arteries. We're cauterizing them. Don't come up." She was really weak the next day. And then on Sunday was Mother's Day, and Elizabeth was one that never got depressed, ever. She never got depressed, but this one she was, and I pulled into my bag of tricks of almost 20 years with her of stuff that I would do to try and get her to smile and try and get her to laugh, being my normal goofy self. And none of it worked, Tim. And our conversation turned to what if this is the one you don't come home from? We had a really good marriage, a really good marriage, and one point of conflict. I'm a go getter, I'm a type A. That's why Dr. Dobson and I got along so well together. We really got along well.

And I would push her and I'd be like, "You got to try and take care of better care of your health cardiovascular wise, and you got to do this." And she snapped at me one time and she said, "You don't think I want to live?" And I said, "Hold on. Time out, babe. I know you want to live, but I really question how much you want to get better." And so when our conversation turned to what if this is the one you don't come home from, I said, "Baby, I don't want you to stick around for us. You have poured so much into us." She was the most emotionally intelligent human being that I've ever met. I said, "You've poured so much into us emotionally in teaching us about emotional intelligence. That we'll be fine. I promise you, it'll be hard if you don't come home. Believe me, it's going to be hard, but I promise you we'll be okay, but if you stick around, I need you to stick around for you."

Two days later, she had a nurse in her room who was brushing her hair, and this nurse was a Christian and started singing hymns over Elizabeth and Elizabeth had this just crazy experience with God. And the next morning when she called me to tell me about it, she felt like she wasn't in Heaven. She wasn't in her body, but she was somewhere in the middle and she was communing with God. She never felt this kind of love. And when she was describing it, she said, "Steve, I'm going to stick around for me." And I thought, "Sweet. We're on. All right. This is beautiful."

A week later, she was in her room getting the news that she was going to come home the next day on May 20th. We had a FaceTime call at about 3:00 in the afternoon I believe it was, and we started talking about the details of what do you want to eat? We're going to cook for you, we're going to shower you with love. We're going to have friends come over, but we're going to try and stagger it so we're not overwhelming you. So that way, we're you getting plenty of time to rest as well, going through all those details. 30 minutes later, I get a call from the hospital and my first thought was "Sweet. I'm picking her up." Instead, it

was the hospital calling me to tell me “your wife has gone into cardiac arrest. You need to get up here now.”

Dr. Tim Clinton: No way.

Steve Reiter: That morning, Tim, she sent more than 100 texts to friends talking about how excited she was about coming home and this great news. And then because she had been on blood thinners all those years, they had to give her a coagulant to stop the bleeding when she was bleeding in her lungs, and that presented a blood clot risk. And I constantly have this question because no alarm went off when she went into cardiac arrest. She was down on all fours, gasping for air when a doctor just happened to walk in. Had I been there in that room, would that have made a difference? Those critical minutes between when the nurse had left her room and when that doctor just happened to walk in, would that have saved my wife? People need people in the room. They need that love. They need that attention.

Dr. Tim Clinton: What's screaming in my heart and in my mind are Matthew and Caleb, what about their journey? What about the cries and screams of their heart for their mom? Who's talking to him, who's helping them? What'd you say to him?

Steve Reiter: Oh boy. When I talked earlier about that seed being planted, that this was going to be my journey, God had also done the same thing in them. Matthew admitted during grief counseling that he knew in his spirit when he turned 21 years old, his mom wasn't going to be around. Caleb, when Elizabeth was going through that lupus flare up in 2013 and 2014, we actually had to pull him out of school because we would drop him off and we'd get a call about an hour later, "Caleb is crying, he's not stopping. You need to come pick him up." So we ended up just actually pulling him out of school, and he repeated the first grade. His principal came over a couple months after Elizabeth had passed as we were talking through schooling options and everything, and she said what he told his teacher was, "I hope my mom doesn't die today."

God was really kind of preparing all of us to go through this, and I think it's one of the reasons why I'm so proud that I made sure that they got that extra time with her during that shutdown, during the quarantine, because they have those memories. They'll always have those memories of us playing board games every single night during the pandemic, during the quarantine, during the shutdown. And I'm fortunate in that two days after she passed, a friend of mine who lost his wife, we met on a Family Talk recording session up in Bend, Oregon at Crystal Peaks Youth Ranch. Mark Riling, his wife Jenny, had just been diagnosed with pancreatic cancer a few months earlier and six months later she was gone.

And so I would check in with Mark occasionally, see how he was doing, and we had a phone call two days after Elizabeth passed, and at the end of the phone call, he said, "Steve, can I give you a piece of advice?" I said, "Absolutely." He said, "Do whatever you can to get your kids into grief counseling." He said, "If you put it on credit cards, if you have to raise funds from family, you do it,"

because he married a widow. And since they both lost spouses, they facilitate grief groups in southern Oregon, and he said, "Bro, we see a vast difference between the kids that get grief counseling and the kids that don't. Kids that don't get grief counseling, alcohol, drugs, promiscuous, anger, grades, acting out, you name it, they're going through it. And the kids that do get grief counseling, it's not that they don't have issues," but he said, "Bro, it's night and day different."

And so within two weeks I was in grief counseling, and then within a week or two, the boys were in it, and both of them have admitted that it was huge for them. So if I can give the listeners one piece of advice, if they know someone with kids that loses a spouse, that those kids lose a parent, rally. Make sure that those kids are getting grief counseling because it will pay dividends. Organize, make sure that they're getting it done because it'll be huge. It'll be huge for that family and their healing.

Roger Marsh:

Well, what a heart rendering story, however, God always brings good out of pain. You'll want to join us again tomorrow for part two and the conclusion of our conversation with Steve Reiter here on Family Talk. He'll discuss the Never Alone Project and how he hopes to impact others with it.

Here at Family Talk, we hope to honor Elizabeth's memory with these programs as well. Now, if you missed any part of today's discussion, you can visit our website at [drjamesdobson.org/familytalk](http://drjamesdobson.org/familytalk) to hear today's program. That's [drjamesdobson.org/familytalk](http://drjamesdobson.org/familytalk). And if you need someone to talk to about your own personal struggles or challenges or maybe those of someone in your family, remember, we are here to listen 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Our phone number here at the Dr. James Dobson Family Institute is 877-732-6825. Our trained customer care team is available to provide you with some free resources and most importantly to pray with and for you. You don't have to go through the hard times alone. Again, our number is 877-732-6825.

Well, thanks again for joining us today. I'm Roger Marsh, and from all of us here at Family Talk, we hope you have a blessed rest of your day, God's richest blessings to you and your family. And be sure to join us again next time right here for another edition of Dr. James Dobson's Family Talk.

Announcer:

This has been a presentation of the Dr. James Dobson Family Institute.