



JOE SULLIVAN (C)

Joe Sullivan’s lawyer and good friend of 20 years, Dick Campbell, managed to save some money for Sullivan after the Sullivan Distributing Company, the family house, the antique collection—almost all important possessions—had been sold to cover expenses related to the bankruptcy of Sullivan Distributing Company. The firm had gone into bankruptcy shortly after its liquor license was revoked for misrepresenting product as 3.2 beer. Campbell presented the money to Sullivan and told him to save it for when he might desperately need it. “This is your runnin’ money,” he said.

During the following year, Sullivan hit rough times. His pride was damaged when he took job after job where he was not respected. He was rejected by many of his once-loyal friends. The worst part, for him, was that he did not have the time he wanted to devote to the most important thing in his life, his family.

By the summer of 1991, Sullivan had found a deal he thought would get him out of the hole. Using the money from Campbell, and without telling anyone, he invested in a room-size video machine that dispensed movies. Sullivan lied to his wife Colleen so she wouldn’t worry; he told her a rich California partner was investing with him. At Christmas time things looked good, and Sullivan’s spirits were high.

But by February 1992, it was obvious the deal had fallen apart. He thought there was no way to escape his debts, his collapse in the business world, or the way he had let down his family. Sullivan wrote in a note to his family, “I’ve tried very hard but things just get worse. Please try to understand. I’m sorry but the hole is too deep to get out of.” On February 6, 1992, Sullivan drove himself to a park outside of Castle Rock, Colorado, where he committed suicide.

As later reported in the *Rocky Mountain News*, “[Sullivan] lost his liquor license. He lost his business. He lost his reputation. He lost his friends. He lost his house. He lost his fortune. He lost his savings. He lost his confidence.”

Professor Dennis Wittmer and Deanna Wittmer of the Daniels College of Business prepared this case as the basis for class discussion.

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Two thousand people attended Sullivan's funeral. Reverend Daniel Bohte related a story to ease the mourners' grief. "Within recent memory, a tragic fire took place in a high-rise complex in Puerto Rico," Bohte told the mourners that night. "And rescue equipment simply could not reach those who were on the upper floors. As the flames built behind them, some people went onto their balconies, and they jumped to certain death. No one accused them of suicide." There is just one difference, Bohte said, between those poor souls and Joe Sullivan: "You and I—God help us—did not see the flames at his back."

Sullivan's family and friends still felt guilty, thinking they should have seen the signs. Right before he died, Sullivan had told one business colleague, "You never called me after I had my problems. I thought you didn't love me anymore."

In the midst of the turmoil with the distributing company, Sullivan had told his wife Colleen, "I thought I couldn't make a mistake." His friends and family described him as a "fine, principled generous human being, with 'the moral certitude of a Boy Scout.'" But the infallible Sullivan had proved himself and those who knew him wrong.