



TO WRITE LOVE ON HER ARMS

Q. What is To Write Love on Her Arms?

A. TWLOHA is an interfaith, non-profit movement dedicated to presenting hope and finding help for those struggling with depression, addiction, self-injury and suicide.

TWLOHA exists to encourage, inform, inspire, and also to invest directly into treatment and recovery.

Patt's summary:

Started 2006 in Florida by Jamie Tworkowski.
Rose to prominence through Facebook and celebrity and band endorsements.
Tour w/ bands, and present workshops and speeches in England, Canada, East Coast, Midwest. From Nov 1st - end of 2011, they have 29 events scheduled.

2006, Jamie & friends meet 19 yr. old Renee.
She's in a blur of coke, pot, pills and alcohol.
They talk her into going to treatment. She promises to do so the next day.
Instead she takes the last of her cocaine and writes "**F— up**" on her arm -- with a razor blade.

She's too risky for the treatment center to take her, so Jamie & friends take her in. They spend 5 days treating her like a princess, showing their love every way they can, taking her to rock concerts, sports events, nice dinners, etc. Day 5, she enters rehab.

Jamie writes her story up & puts it on Facebook.
Needing a title, he thinks of what he really wished she had done & calls it:

To Write Love on Her Arms.

Suddenly they have an on-line community of 200,000.
They put TWLOHA on tee shirts & sell them to pay for Renee's rehab.
Bands perform wearing their tee shirts; they tour together w/ TWLOHA folks giving speeches, workshops; pick up tons of celebrity endorsements; do good deeds.
As of Jan 1, 2011, have over 1 million followers on FB.

On October 1, 2011, TWLOHA's first ever high school campaign, "The Storytellers" began accepting applications.

The campaign aims to give high school students resources and support to bring awareness about the issues while also fundraising for the organization. The top fundraisers will receive a TWLOHA event at their school for no cost <http://www.twloha.com/move/storytellers/>

TO WRITE LOVE ON HER ARMS

THE STORY: by jamie tworkowski

Pedro the Lion is loud in the speakers, and the city waits just outside our open windows. She sits and sings, legs crossed in the passenger seat, her pretty voice hiding in the volume. Music is a safe place and Pedro is her favorite. It hits me that she won't see this skyline for several weeks, and we will be without her. I lean forward, knowing this will be written, and I ask what she'd say if her story had an audience. She smiles. "Tell them to look up. Tell them to remember the stars."

I would rather write her a song, because songs don't wait to resolve, and because songs mean so much to her. Stories wait for endings, but songs are brave things bold enough to sing when all they know is darkness. These words, like most words, will be written next to midnight, between hurricane and harbor, as both claim to save her.

Renee is 19. When I meet her, cocaine is fresh in her system. She hasn't slept in 36 hours and she won't for another 24. It is a familiar blur of coke, pot, pills and alcohol. She has agreed to meet us, to listen and to let us pray. We ask Renee to come with us, to leave this broken night. She says she'll go to rehab tomorrow, but she isn't ready now. It is too great a change. We pray and say goodbye and it is hard to leave without her.

She has known such great pain; haunted dreams as a child, the near-constant presence of evil ever since. She has felt the touch of awful naked men, battled depression and addiction, and attempted suicide. Her arms remember razor blades, fifty scars that speak of self-inflicted wounds. Six hours after I meet her, she is feeling trapped, two groups of "friends" offering opposite ideas. Everyone is asleep. The sun is rising. She drinks long from a bottle of liquor, takes a razor blade from the table and locks herself in the bathroom. She cuts herself, using the blade to write "FUCK UP" large across her left forearm.

The nurse at the treatment center finds the wound several hours later. The center has no detox, names her too great a risk, and does not accept her. For the next five days, she is ours to love. We become her hospital and the possibility of healing fills our living room with life. It is unspoken and there are only a few of us, but we will be her church, the body of Christ coming alive to meet her needs, to write love on her arms.

She is full of contrast, more alive and closer to death than anyone I've known, like a Johnny Cash song or some theatre star. She owns attitude and humor beyond her 19 years, and when she tells me her story, she is humble and quiet and kind, shaped by the pain of a hundred lifetimes. I sit privileged but breaking as she shares. Her life has been so dark yet there is some soft hope in her words, and on consecutive evenings, I watch the prettiest girls in the room tell her that she's beautiful. I think it's God reminding her.

I've never walked this road, but I decide that if we're going to run a five-day rehab, it is going to be the coolest in the country. It is going to be rock and roll. We start with the basics; lots of fun, too much Starbucks and way too many cigarettes.

Thursday night she is in the balcony for Band Marino, Orlando's finest. They are indie-folk-fabulous, a movement disguised as a circus. She loves them and she smiles when I point out the A&R man from Atlantic Europe, in town from London just to catch this show.

She is in good seats when the Magic beat the Sonics the next night, screaming like a lifelong fan with every Dwight Howard dunk. On the way home, we stop for more coffee and books, Blue Like Jazz and (Anne Lamott's) Travelling Mercies.

On Saturday, the Taste of Chaos tour is in town and I'm not even sure we can get in, but doors do open and minutes after parking, we are on stage for Thrice, one of her favorite bands. She stands ten feet from the drummer, smiling constantly. It is a bright moment there in the music, as light and rain collide above the stage. It feels like healing. It is certainly hope.

Sunday night is church and many gather after the service to pray for Renee, this her last night before entering rehab. Some are strangers but all are friends tonight. The prayers move from broken to bold, all encouraging. We're talking to God but I think as much, we're talking to her, telling her she's loved, saying she does not go alone. One among us knows her best. Ryan sits in the corner strumming an acoustic guitar, singing songs she's inspired.

After church our house fills with friends, there for a few more moments before goodbye. Everyone has some gift for her, some note or hug or piece of encouragement. She pulls me aside and tells me she would like to give me something. I smile surprised, wondering what it could be. We walk through the crowded living room, to the garage and her stuff.

She hands me her last razor blade, tells me it is the one she used to cut her arm and her last lines of cocaine five nights before. She's had it with her ever since, shares that tonight will be the hardest night and she shouldn't have it. I hold it carefully, thank her and know instantly that this moment, this gift, will stay with me. It hits me to wonder if this great feeling is what Christ knows when we surrender our broken hearts, when we trade death for life.

As we arrive at the treatment center, she finishes: "The stars are always there but we miss them in the dirt and clouds. We miss them in the storms. Tell them to remember hope. We have hope."

I have watched life come back to her, and it has been a privilege. When our time with her began, someone suggested shifts but that is the language of business. Love is something better. I have been challenged and changed, reminded that love is that simple answer to so many of our hardest questions. Don Miller says we're called to hold our hands against the wounds of a broken world, to stop the bleeding. I agree so greatly.

We often ask God to show up. We pray prayers of rescue. Perhaps God would ask us to be that rescue, to be His body, to move for things that matter. He is not invisible when we come alive. I might be simple but more and more, I believe God works in love, speaks in love, is revealed in our love. I have seen that this week and honestly, it has been simple: Take a broken girl, treat her like a famous princess, give her the best seats in the house. Buy her coffee and cigarettes for the coming down, books and bathroom things for the days ahead. Tell her something true when all she's known are lies. Tell her God loves her. Tell her about forgiveness, the possibility of freedom, tell her she was made to dance in white dresses. All these things are true.

We are only asked to love, to offer hope to the many hopeless. We don't get to choose all the endings, but we are asked to play the rescuers. We won't solve all mysteries and our hearts will certainly break in such a vulnerable life, but it is the best way. We were made to be lovers bold in broken places, pouring ourselves out again and again until we're called home.

I have learned so much in one week with one brave girl. She is alive now, in the patience and safety of rehab, covered in marks of madness but choosing to believe that God makes things new, that He meant hope and healing in the stars. She would ask you to remember.

