

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Bullet in the Chamber is personal. The story explores, in part, the issues surrounding the death of my 22-year-old son Stephen.

I came up with the title and began making notes for the manuscript on August 24, 2011 – three days after Stephen went missing. He was gone for a week, but was eventually found dead in my car parked next to a *Neighborhood Watch* sign in a quiet residential area near my home in Washington, D.C.

Eight months later, I began writing the first draft, but I was only able to write six chapters before I had to stop. It was too soon.

I set the project aside for nearly two years -- until September 2014. Over the next seven months, I wrote the first full draft. Portions of the original, agonizing chapters survive here. So, a lot of this novel is autobiographical, yet heavily fictionalized, too.

My wife Cindy and I are indebted to and grateful for the thousands of people who have supported us with their prayers, encouragement, and kindness.

When Stephen went missing, our friend Julie Chen set up a *Find Stephen DeDakis* page on Facebook that galvanized a groundswell of support on social media during our desperate search. My CNN colleague Wolf Blitzer spread the word to his 500,000+ followers on Twitter. Later, in the spring of 2012, Julie kept Stephen's memory alive in a lovely art installation she titled "Whirlwind: What's Left Behind" – a creative display of

Stephen's clothing at the Massachusetts College of Art and Design in Boston.

(www.juliechen.net/stephen).

I'm eternally grateful to my wife Cindy for her companionship and love. If there's one thing she and I have learned about surviving the death of a child, it's that grief is personal. There's no *one* way or *right* way to grieve. Consequently, I needed to write this book, but Cindy may choose never to read it. And that's okay. Even so, and in spite of her own excruciating pain, she has been a constant and comforting companion during the writing process, offering a helpful description or turn-of-phrase every now and then at just the right time.

Many people have played an important role in my life during this time and in the creation of this book. I'm especially grateful to my grief counselor, Adrienne Kraft. Adrienne listened attentively and actively as I navigated the shoals of grief. She helped me gain clarity and understanding about myself as a writer – and as a human being.

For more than two years, Adrienne and I met regularly at The Wendt Center for Loss and Healing – an organization I first became aware of when I was at the D.C. morgue identifying Stephen's body. I strongly urge you to support the Wendt Center in its desire to make grief-counseling services affordable for all who mourn.

(www.wendtcenter.org)

I created my protagonist Lark Chadwick in 1994 when I began writing my first novel, *Fast Track* – long before I met my friend Jillian Harding in 2008 when she was a CNN intern. Jill went on to CNBC and CBS in New York where she was a producer, but her acquaintance with Stephen and her friendship with me has given me valuable insights into what makes Lark tick. Jill's influence permeates *Bullet in the Chamber*, and

Troubled Water before it. Thank you, Jill for being such a great friend and sounding board (without sounding bored).

Jenna Bourne is another former CNN intern who has gone on to have a successful career in journalism (she's now an investigative reporter at 10 Tampa Bay, WTSP-TV (CBS) in Tampa, Florida). She's also deigned to be my friend.

It was my privilege to be a White House correspondent for CBN News during the last three years of Ronald Reagan's administration. I'm particularly proud of a piece I produced in 1986 showing the adversarial relationship between the press and the presidency.

"Sometimes, it seems to be less of a hunt for news than to see if they can't catch ya," Reagan told me when his press secretary, Larry Speakes, ushered my camera crew and me into the Oval Office to shoot some video of him conferring with the president. I've tried to capture a bit of that press-versus-the-prez friction in these pages as reporters persistently try to find out what's really going on behind the spin. You can see the piece for yourself on my YouTube channel.

Paula Cruikshank of Commerce Clearinghouse, the late Forrest Boyd of Mutual Radio and Helen Thomas of UPI were kind to me during my White House years. Helen graciously came to speak to a journalism class I taught one summer at American University in Washington.

Josh Lederman of the Associated Press regularly occupied Helen Thomas' front-row center seat in the White House briefing room. Josh, yet another former CNN intern, took the broadcast news writing class I taught in CNN's D.C. bureau. I'm indebted to Josh for reading the *Bullet in the Chamber* manuscript and giving me his invaluable

comments, corrections, and insights on covering the White House in the digital age.

Thanks, Josh, for being so generous with your time.

Finally, yet another big hug to my agent Barbara Casey. Barbara's been my champion since 2004 when we met at the Harriette Austin Writers Conference in Athens, Georgia. Thank you, Barbara, for your support, encouragement, and for always being able to find a home for Lark.

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