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## Remembering Garrett

*U.S. senator from Oregon hopes his memoir will help other families with children suffering from depression*

**By Susan Whitney**

Deseret Morning News

Gordon Smith begins his book by telling about the night the police came to his door. It was 10 p. m. on Sept. 8, 2003.

Smith, who is a U.S. senator from Oregon, had been away at a political event with his wife, Sharon. They'd just returned to their home in Bethesda, Md.

While they were on the road they'd tried to reach their son Garrett, a student at Utah Valley State College in Orem. They had called and called, but Garrett hadn't picked up the phone. His parents were alarmed because their son had changed the greeting on his answering machine.

"I'm not feeling well," Garrett's new message said. "Please don't call me anymore."

And so Smith's book begins with these words, "I can still hear the knock at the door. I can still feel the dread that filled my heart."

His dread was not misplaced. The police did, in fact, come to tell the Smiths that Garrett had killed himself. Then the Smiths knew the deepest sorrow of their lives. Smith calls it a black valley of grief. He also felt an abiding sense of failure.

What did it matter that he was a U.S. senator, had been a bishop in the LDS Church, a successful businessman? Those achievements seemed mere vanities to Smith, especially when



Sen. Gordon Smith and his wife, Sharon, with their son, Garrett, at Garrett's high school graduation in June 2000. Garrett had a high IQ, but dyslexia made school difficult for him.

*Smith Family Photo*

compared to his most important responsibility, his responsibility to his family. He felt he should have been able to save his child.

Smith's book, "Remembering Garrett; One Family's Battle With a Child's Depression," has just been published by Carroll & Graf. Smith will be in Salt Lake City on Tuesday for a book signing, where he will also talk briefly and answer questions.

Before Garrett took a bottle of sleeping pills, Smith says he knew very little about depression. He had never taken a psychology class. He didn't know the signs of impending suicide. When he comes to Salt Lake City, Smith expects to meet at least a few other parents who missed the warnings.

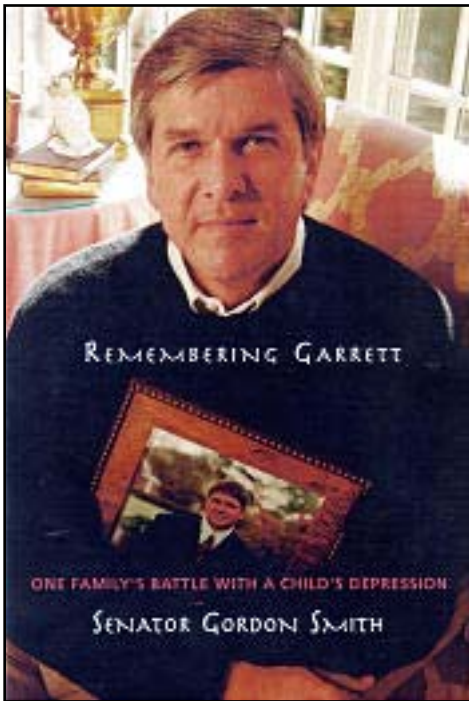
In a recent telephone interview with the Deseret Morning News, Smith said he and his wife have friends and relatives in Utah and — ever since their own son died here — he has been amazed to hear about a large number of young Utahns who have killed themselves. "It is so heart-wrenching for the parents," he said. "It is the ultimate in self-recrimination."

Smith never blamed his wife for Garrett's death and praises her as a wonderful mother. Nor do he and his wife blame Garrett's friends or Garrett's doctors or the staff at the college. However, until he learned more about the bipolar disorder his son suffered from, Smith did blame himself.

For a time after Garrett died, Smith wanted to quit the Senate to be home more often with his other two children. During the days after Garrett's death, President James E. Faust, second counselor in the First Presidency of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, called Smith three times. He consoled Smith and counseled with him, and when, during the third call, Smith told him he wanted to leave his job, President Faust told him not to. As Smith recalls it, President Faust said the Smiths' other children needed to see their father's good example. They needed to see him grieving, fully, without giving up.

In the end, being in the Senate gave Smith a chance to do something that meant a lot to him. He sponsored a bill to fund screening tests for depression in children and to beef up the suicide-counseling programs at various colleges.

His fellow senators are compassionate people, according to Smith. Democrats as well as his fellow Republicans grieved with him. "Each found a way to put an emotional arm around me."



Gordon Smith's book tells of the depression and eventual suicide of his son, Garrett.

Hillary Clinton took him for a long walk to talk things over. Ted Kennedy approached him repeatedly, with tears in his eyes, unable to speak. Catholic senators lit candles in their parishes. Protestants included the Smiths in their prayer circles. Joe Lieberman had the Smiths remembered in his synagogue. Sens. Kennedy and Orrin Hatch wrote the introduction to "Remembering Garrett."

The retired chaplain of the U.S. Senate, Lloyd John Ogilvie, helped Smith find a way through the pain. Ogilvie counseled gratitude.

Smith still deals with his grief by praying to thank the Lord for the nearly 22 years he was able to spend with Garrett. It also helped when a psychologist told him that he could have been home with his family every night and his son still would have lacked sufficient levels of serotonin in his brain, still would have been chemically depressed.

Meanwhile, at Utah Valley State College, psychologist Jack Jensen, director of counseling and psychological services, said he was not aware of the federal grant that bears Garrett's name — and so the school did not apply for it. However, UVSC counselors are planning a new outreach program, Jensen explained.

Part of what they want to do is train staff and professors. Jensen and the other counselors believe depressed students will often drop hints, either in what they write for a class or in what they say to a teacher. One of the first things the counselors will teach the faculty is to never promise a student confidentiality, said Jensen.

The teacher needs to call the student's therapist, if there is one, or the counseling center. The teacher needs to call the student's parents, maybe even his religious leaders, Jensen said. "The thing is to get them some help."

They've had far too many suicides, Jensen said. The year Garrett Smith killed himself, he was one of eight UVSC students who did so. Jensen said only one or two of those students was seeing a therapist at the time of their deaths. (Garrett had seen a psychologist and also had a prescription for an anti-depressant.)

As for Gordon and Sharon Smith, they have gone on to learn all they can about suicide. Smith



Garrett Smith and his dad at Reagan Airport in Washington, D.C., when Garrett left for an LDS mission. Gordon Smith said Garrett worried about being able to memorize the lessons and scriptures. He also said Garrett was sometimes depressed on his mission, but overall he treasured his experience.

*Smith Family Photo*

says they are particularly impressed with Columbia University's TeenScreen Program ([www.teencreen.org](http://www.teencreen.org)). Smith says the test is highly accurate in predicting whether a child is prone to depression and gives parents the tools to help.

In the Smiths' hometown of Pendleton, Ore., public-school officials heard about the Columbia screening test in March 2003, got funding through a local Catholic hospital, and began screening teens throughout the county in 2004. District officials plan to offer the test, with parental permission, to all seventh-graders. Parents are informed of the results and are told how to get help if their child is found to be depressed. Therapy is available regardless of the parents' ability to pay.

In his book, Smith tells several anecdotes about Garrett's despondence. When his son was 15 or so, Smith recalls that Sharon found him crying in his room. Garrett said he had just realized he could never get married because he would never be smart enough to support a family. His parents tried to reassure him. In the end, they believed they had.

Writing a book about his son's death crystallized the pain, requiring Smith to relive Garrett's struggles and feelings of worthlessness. But it was also healing, Smith said. He loved writing about his happy times with Garrett and about his son's sweet nature. Smith seems to find it healing, also, to tell as many parents as he can about the screening tests for depression.

It is something he wishes he'd known about sooner. Smith said, "We take our children to get vaccinations and dental checkups but we never think of getting them a mental-health checkup."

### ► **If you go**

**What:** Book signing for "Remembering Garrett: One Family's Battle With a Child's Depression"

**Where:** Fort Union Deseret Book, 1110 East Fort Union Blvd.

**When:** Tuesday, 7 p.m.

**How much:** Free

**Phone:** 561-8777

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