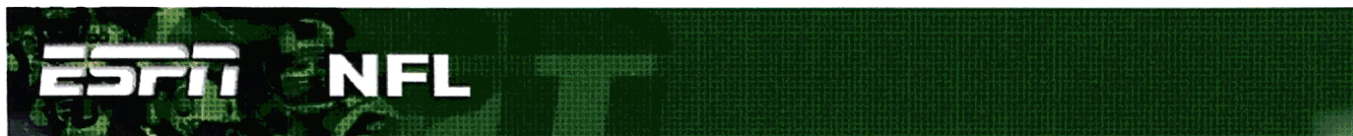


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Out of tragedy comes a place called Hope

By Anne Marie Anderson
Special to ESPN.com

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The knock on the door came at 2 a.m. It's never good news at that hour. Fred Biletnikoff and his wife Angela bolted from their bed and rushed to the door. A police officer asked if Tracey was home. Racing through the house to Tracey's room, Fred knew his daughter was dead even before he saw the empty bed.

Biletnikoff, now the Oakland Raiders' receivers coach, had devoted his life to the gridiron. Having grown up a gawky kid in football-crazed eastern Pennsylvania, he eventually made it all the way to the NFL, playing 14 seasons for the Raiders. In 1977, Biletnikoff earned MVP honors as Oakland won the Super Bowl. His hard work on the field also paid off when, in 1988, he was elected to the Pro Football Hall of Fame.

But his personal life, like that of many single-minded success stories, had suffered.

In 1991, Biletnikoff and his second wife divorced. It wasn't long before Tracey, the third of his five children, began experimenting with drugs. By the time she was 17, Tracey was addicted to heroin and methamphetamines.

"You think about when you got divorced, and how close (Tracey and I) were, and what effect that had, and then the guilt goes into you," said Biletnikoff. "That goes through your mind all the time."

In 1997, with only 90 pounds on her 5-foot-8 frame, Tracey hit rock bottom and sought help. Biletnikoff flew her from San Diego, where she had been living with her mother, to Northern California to enter a residential treatment program.

"I called Tracey and said 'Come up here and go into the program,'" Biletnikoff said, "and of course she was trying to throw the bit right off the bat. I said, 'Listen, get your butt up here; you are going to go into the program, and that's how we're going to handle it. We're just going to take a little bit at a time and see how it goes.' When she came up here, the first thing she did when she got off the plane is she said, 'I'm only going there 30 days and that's it,' and I said, 'Listen, let's just see how it is and see how it works out.'"



Fred Biletnikoff has been a member of the Raiders family for more than three decades.

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Those 30 days turned into 10 months in a residential treatment facility run by the Women's Recovery Association, as Tracey turned her focus from drugs to recovery to helping others with the same demons.

"Eventually, it kept working for her," her father said, "and she understood and finally faced up that she had a problem. She went to WRA for a reason. She was interested in staying on the right track, you know, and I really felt that she had a passion for staying clean and sober."

Eventually, Tracey moved out of the facility and in with Fred and Angela. She continued to attend recovery meetings and volunteered with the WRA as a part-time counselor.

"Tracey was learning to live life on life's terms," Angela said. "She was no longer the angry child, the child that had a chip on her shoulder. She was in this whole new world of discovery. Her eyes were wide open, and she was so open to so many different things, just discovering life on a whole new level -- sober."

In September of 1998, Tracey, then 20, began dating a fellow recovering addict and drug counselor named Mohammed Haroon Ali. The 25-year-old Ali was tall and good looking and shared Tracey's passion for helping others in the grasp of drugs. Together they danced, double-dated and enjoyed life sober.

But according to friends, it didn't last long. By the following February, Tracey had grown tired of the relationship. She told Angela that Ali was too needy and depended on her too much for his sobriety, threatening to go back to drugs if she left him. Angela says Tracey had tried to break it off, but a despondent Ali pleaded with her to stay with him. In mid-February, while Tracey was away on a weekend trip with a girlfriend, Ali relapsed on cocaine and heroin in a Saturday-night binge.

When Tracey returned, Ali confessed to her that he had relapsed but refused to admit it publicly. He even had led a recovery meeting earlier in the day while still under the influence of the drugs. Tracey urged him to begin recovery anew, but Ali resisted.

That evening, Feb. 15, 1999, Tracey met her friends at Friendship Hall in San Mateo for her weekly recovery meeting with a program called Project 90. Ali wanted to borrow her car, but Tracey was nervous, suspecting he wanted to use it to buy drugs. With her girlfriends urging her to say no, telling her it was her right to refuse, Tracey marched into Ali's office.

What happened inside that office isn't in dispute. Why it happened is another matter. Ali admitted strangling Tracey with his bare hands. When she was lying on the floor with, as Ali described it, "white stuff coming out of her mouth," he tied a T-shirt around her neck and killed her.

No one, it seemed, was going to say no to Ali. What Tracey didn't know was that someone had tried before.

In 1995, Ali pleaded no contest to kidnapping a former girlfriend. Ali had held his high school sweetheart at knifepoint, driven her to a remote location and threatened to kill her. Why? She says it was because she was going to break up with him. The only thing that saved her was the lie she told. The fast thinking girl said she

“ Since Tracey's death they have been the big support for us. From Mr. Davis to Amy Trask to Bruce Allen to Jon Gruden, there hasn't been a time where they haven't told me, 'You just take care of what you have to take care of. You

had made a mistake. She told Ali she loved him and would never leave him. He relented and let her go.

just put us or football on the back burner.' ”

— *Fred Biletnikoff*

Ali served one year in jail, with a nine-year prison sentence suspended. He was still on probation four years later when he met Tracey Biletnikoff. She never knew about his past.

Ali left Tracey's body on the floor of the office and walked to the restroom to wash his hands, greeting a friend along the way. On his way back, he picked up the keys to a Project 90 van. With the packed auditorium only 25 feet away, Ali carried Tracey's body out the back door and into the van, propping her body up in the front seat, being careful to strap on her seatbelt.

Ali drove first to his cousin's house, telling his cousin he had accidentally killed Biletnikoff and agreeing to turn himself in. But when he had a moment alone, he took off again in the van and ended up driving 20 miles to Cañada College in Redwood City. There, in an empty parking lot, he removed some of Tracey's clothes, left the T-shirt tight around her neck and dumped her body down an embankment. After returning the van and taking Tracey's car, Ali drove off in the rain toward Mexico.

Meanwhile, the Biletnikoffs were panicked. They rifled through Tracey's phone book, calling her friends in a desperate attempt to find her. But no one had seen her. Fred and Angela crawled back into bed and waited. Fred lay with his eyes open, staring at the ceiling filled with dread.

At 7 a.m. the call came. A maintenance worker at a local college had found a body, but when Fred Biletnikoff offered to identify it, the police refused. It was too mangled for a parent to view. Biletnikoff identified his daughter's body by describing a tattoo on her ankle.

The next day Ali was captured attempting to re-enter the country at the Mexican border. During the second day of police interrogation, he confessed.

For two years, the Biletnikoffs waited for Ali to stand trial. Fred returned to coaching, where owner Al Davis and the rest of the Raiders family embraced him.

"Since Tracey's death they have been the big support for us," Fred said. "From Mr. Davis to Amy Trask to Bruce Allen to Jon Gruden, there hasn't been a time where they haven't told me, 'You just take care of what you have to take care of. You just put us or football on the back burner.' At one time Mr. Davis offered me to take off the entire year and then come back the following year. I just said no. I'd rather be back here coaching, and so I went back and coached."

Angela, meanwhile, established the Tracey Biletnikoff Foundation (traceybiletnikoff.org), which promptly collaborated with the Women's Recovery Association to open a six-bed residential treatment home for teen-age girls fighting drug addiction. When it opened in January 2000, they named it Tracey's Place of Hope.

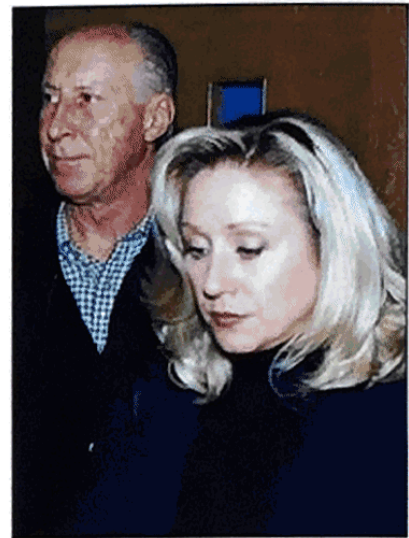
When Ali was brought to trial last March, he faced a jury of seven women and five men during a five-week ordeal in an often-packed courtroom. Fred sat stone-faced in the front row, listening to the gruesome details of his daughter's death. The only crack in his stony demeanor came during Ali's taped confession in which Ali demonstrated how he

strangled Tracey. Fred excused himself to the restroom, and when he returned moments later, his eyes were red-rimmed and wet.

"You want to deal with reality," Fred said. "I guess you've got to deal with it, and perhaps down the road it is all going to hit you. You do have those breakdowns, and they come quick, but that's just, you know -- it wasn't very pretty."

Privately, Angela said, Fred showed much more emotion.

"Fred is very reserved," his wife said. "He is a big, tough guy, but he's probably one of the most sensitive people I've ever met. He broke down many times. Many times. It comes on like waves. You never know when it is going to happen. You aren't prepared for something that is just going to click. It is like turning on a light switch, and all kinds of memories flood in. It happens, but most of the time he's just a big strong guy."



Fred and Angela Biletnikoff leave the courtroom after the verdict last spring.

After three days of deliberations, the jury delivered a guilty verdict -- murder in the first degree. On Aug. 13, Ali was sentenced to 55 years to life in prison. The judge also reinstated Ali's previous nine-year suspended sentence, ordering him to serve the two sentences consecutively. Ali will be eligible for parole in 2055.

"It's tough knowing the trial is over and now you are back to sort of a normal life," Fred said after the verdict had been read. "But now you are dealing with Tracey's death. It's like the trial was a bump in the road, you know, and had to be taken and gotten out of the way. Now we have a clear path to think about Tracey more and deal with that side of it that we really haven't had an opportunity to deal with."

The Biletnikoffs have immersed themselves in carrying on Tracey's passion for sobriety. For the teen-age girls currently in treatment at Tracey's Place of Hope, the pictures of the smiling blonde adorning the walls are a reminder that a life can be turned around and lived soberly. For the Biletnikoffs, the home is their way of turning the nightmare of Tracey's murder into a vehicle to help others in the grasp of addiction.

"She was really interested in moving forward into being a counselor and mentor towards children," Angela said. "And this is something that she conveyed to me that she had a strong feeling about, and that she wanted to do, and I remember this and I can't let her dream die. I just can't. I've got to pick it up and run with it."

The message the Biletnikoffs -- Tracey, as well as Fred and Angela -- want those teen girls to take with them into the world is spelled out in five big letters on the entrance wall -- D-R-E-A-M.

For more information on The Tracey Biletnikoff Foundation or to make a donation to Tracey's Place of Hope call 877-787-2239 or access their website at traceybiletnikoff.org.