

SON OF CONSCIOUSNESS

There is a Zen-like humility, constancy and equilibrium in the presence of PR professional Reggie Burton. Having made a name in journalism, casino board rooms and in public relations for the NFL, Burton founded The RB Group—a boutique public relations and social media marketing company honored as a “Rising Star” by the Western Region Minority Supplier Diversity Council, with a list of clients as far-ranging as the Ogden Wellness Foundation, the Urban League, and the Las Vegas Golden Knights. In building his own firm, the L.A.-born father of three attained many triumphs and faced a host of challenges—but none as exacting as the loss of a son in 2017. Burton began the Avery Burton Foundation in an effort to combat the stigma surrounding mental health. His book, “This is Depression”, has led to national speaking engagements and workshops as memorial and mission in the name of his son—Avery.

Both my parents are from Louisiana. Mom is from Monroe and Dad is from Shreveport. My mom worked at Hughes, an aeronautical firm, in the South Bay. She passed away when I was 13. Dad worked for Firestone Tire and Rubber. I’m the youngest of four. My major was journalism and I ended up with a minor in African-American history. That experience was perfect for times like now. My first job was in Reno working in the newspaper industry, my chosen vocation. Like a lot of young kids just out of school, I figured I would do that for a few years and get called up to the big leagues—work for *USA Today* or come back to the hometown paper—*The Herald Examiner* or the *LA Times*. A few opportunities found me in professional sports. I went with the San Diego Chargers—going from being a journalist to the dark side of public relations. Loved it. Went to the Superbowl my first year. It was just a wonderful experience. But life started to happen. My first son arrived. The good thing about those jobs working in pro sports is that you get to realize every little boy’s dream . . . but at the same time you also have to transition into becoming a man, a father, a parent and all those things. I was getting some offers. I left and focused on family and life and career. That focus on family eventually led me all the way back to Reno where my wife is originally from. I got a job with Circus Circus, Reno as a publicist. That circle brought me to Las Vegas in 2000. I’ve been here ever since. In my time working on the Strip, including for MGM Mirage, then operating my own business, one of the core values has been relationships. I feel good about the contributions I’ve made to the community, winning awards and attending dinners in recognition, getting my flowers, so to speak. But in 2017, I realized there was a lot I didn’t know. I didn’t know about mental health. I didn’t know about depression . . . until my son, Avery, had a major depressive episode. Right after graduating from college at UNLV, he experienced that anxiety, that stress, which ultimately leads into suicidal ideation. He wound up taking his life that summer. From May of 2017 to July 24th of 2017, we watched a 22-year-old who had plans for his life, knew what he wanted to do, had applied to grad school and passed the GRE on his first try. . . all of a sudden. . . like the whole world turned upside down. It happened so quickly. The only question I was left to ask is: what is it about mental health, depression, anxiety that would turn a 22-year-old kid into a shell of himself? That was my mission—to find out. And once I figured it out, though I’m still learning, I wanted to find a way to help other parents. Help other families. I tell people when I do my talks, *‘I had a blind spot.’* In the years of raising him leading up to his having a major depressive episode, I really didn’t give a lot of thought to my boys’ mental health. The Trayvon Martin situation was a time when Avery was running track for Foothill High School. And I used to have a talk—the talk: *‘When you go running make sure you have your phone out where people can see it. If people question you, you don’t have stand there and answer questions. Be*

polite but no one has the right to detain you' . . . other examples of things that impact mental health is this thing about competition within the gender — boys calling each other out based on are you an alpha or a beta. Do you have girlfriends. Do you lift weights. All these different things that they're dealing with. Having said all that, the one thing I haven't said is. . . *trauma*. . . the repetitive almost-PTSD of seeing a Trayvon Martin on a loop being killed over and over again, or a George Floyd, or a Tamir Rice—these are all conversations we have to have to try to help our young people understand what is trauma—how is it triggered and how do you deal with it? Ignorance is no longer an excuse for not being able to help our young people deal with mental health in a proactive way. With Avery, he made a unilateral decision to end his life. But he didn't want that to be something other kids would do. I know that's not what he wanted. What he wants is for young people to live out their lives and their dreams . . .