

Life Beyond Loss

Max Taylor Keeps a Promise to Begin a New Chapter



Kent and Max skiing at Snowbird, Utah, in March 2019.

By Joy Onozuka

At the beginning of the pandemic, Max made a promise. He agreed to work with his dad, Kent Taylor, founder and CEO of the Texas Roadhouse restaurant chain. Kent had decided he was ready to step down as CEO after the pandemic, so he wanted someone close to him and the company to help him during that transition.

Yes, Kent Taylor, who always devoted 110 percent of his energy to work, was ready to spend time with

his children and grandchildren instead. In return, Kent promised Max that he'd be free to walk away from Texas Roadhouse after that. It would survive without their daily involvement. At that moment, neither could have imagined the havoc the coronavirus would wreak on their lives within a year.

"I didn't want to be associated with the big man, the big shot," Max said. "That's why I never wanted to work at Roadhouse. I basically told him I'd put my life on pause for three years.... He needed someone he could trust, and

he needed me to do a job." Max's first job was working for the Real Estate Team to negotiate lease deferments. His next job was procuring personal protective equipment to shield Roadies from infection.

"He liked the Taiwan model," Max said, "where we're keeping Covid out. We're going to fight Covid." Max felt that was unrealistic. Having spoken with friends in Sweden, where the government took a much more *laissez-faire* approach to containing the virus, Max wanted to figure out how to live

with the virus since he was convinced that they couldn't beat Mother Nature. "We agreed on a lot but sometimes we had a different mentality," he said.

When Kent saw an obstacle, he focused on how to overcome it, how to get around it. His attitude, according to Max, had always been that if you want something, you're going to have to make it happen. That mindset—that determination—served Kent well throughout his life, paving the way from a restaurant idea sketched on a napkin to an empire of more than 600 American steakhouses in the U.S. and dozens more internationally. In this global crisis, Kent was unwavering about protecting his people from Covid-19. He was going to fight the coronavirus, and Max would help make that happen.

Near the end of 2020, like millions of others, Kent contracted the coronavirus, but he bounced back relatively quickly. His sense of smell and taste were off, but he otherwise felt okay. But, shortly after that, he developed tinnitus.

"I would say his lifestyle laid the groundwork for the possibility of developing tinnitus.... He grew up in the seventies with rock-n-roll, the disco era, running nightclubs, stuff like that," said Max. "It was probably the Covid virus that initiated.... tinnitus symptoms.... And then it was likely his reaction to the vaccine that pushed it over the bearable line."

Max recalled that, from the mid-2000s, Kent had become more proactive in protecting his hearing because he didn't want to end up like his own dad, who has severe hearing loss from years of military service in the U.S. Army. Kent's hearing was good, and his health had always been good. "Dad was a private guy with his tinnitus and skin cancers [which he



Kent Taylor relaxing on the ski slope in 2020 before the pandemic.

had removed]," Max said. "He never really liked talking about [either], even though he was relatively open about his health." But Max understood from the start that the tinnitus was bothering him. He also knew his dad was determined that it would not hinder him. Thus, it gave Max pause when his dad stopped traveling.

"It got to the point where he couldn't fly anymore because [the tinnitus] would get so bad whenever he would get on a plane.... This man was flying—he was traveling probably 200 days a year. So, it was unlike him not to be on the road," Max reflected.

Kent had decamped to Florida, where he thought he could find answers to ridding himself of tinnitus. "He's one of those people who wants results, and he wants to get them now," said Max, adding that that fixation was part of the problem because it made him impatient.

"He was one of those people who tries stuff until you figure it out; that worked for him professionally," he said. With his health, however, that meant

too many cooks were in the kitchen. "He was determined that someone had cracked the code [for curing tinnitus]. He just needed to find out where they were."

But Kent wasn't always looping in his primary care physician as he consulted countless medical professionals and other people in the field of tinnitus. "He was sort of secretive about it," said Max, who suspected he was trying multiple treatments at the same time without giving any one enough time to work.

"I think the one thing he maybe feared more than tinnitus was showing weakness," Max said. Kent didn't want people to pity him. "He was going to be old but strong—he wanted to be doing 110 percent." And it was that level of intensity that Kent brought to "beating" tinnitus. "He was just stressing himself out all the time about it.... He couldn't take any time to devote to enjoying life because he was so devoted to finding the solution," Max said.

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Watching his father, Max felt like Kent was on a mad quest for the Holy Grail. “This was his obsession at the end of his life—to find peace, find this cure. And he could never find it.”

Kent had become hyper-obsessed and wasn’t sleeping. Max could hear the disappointment in his father’s voice as he described the unrelenting sound of a propeller plane in his head. Things went from bad to worse following Kent’s Covid-19 vaccination, when the sound amplified to that of a jet screeching across the sky.

“He [was] in tremendous pain.... It was then that I saw the first signs of him starting to dial back the 110 percent attitude that he’d always had,” Max said. “And I could see him putting less than 110 percent into finding a cure after that.... It was the first time I’d ever heard that in his voice—him kind of giving up on something,” Max reflected. Kent couldn’t do his usual 110 percent with tinnitus in his life.

This is a rough patch, Max thought to himself. His dad would be okay. Nonetheless, he had concerns, which he shared with Kent. “He wasn’t sleeping very much.... He exerted all his time looking externally for a

solution instead of being his own solution,” said Max, who pressed his dad to find some sort of internal balance. “I think that was probably his... missing link, in my opinion, for his treatment program. He didn’t focus much on acceptance or learning to mitigate it in his own mind.... He was always looking to quiet the noise rather than to see the noise as a new normal and learn to move on.” Max kept pushing him to take more time to work with the tinnitus internally.

Being raised in a libertarian-style home by entrepreneurs, Max had long been encouraged to be responsible for himself, explore life, and to be accountable for his choices and the consequences. Outside of classes at university, he delved into Buddhism and learned about Stoic philosophy, both of which espoused values and morals that aligned with his upbringing. “I merged a couple of different

philosophies that guide my life,” he said. “I love the Eastern way of being present and taking stock of how small we are in the grand scheme of things.... [In] Stoic beliefs, we have a virtuous life to live. We have duty to perform.... It’s for our communities, our societies, to our families.”

Although “Buddhism teaches about living with suffering,” Max said, his dad’s “mentality was overcoming or defeating whatever came his way; he did not spend time to harness mental training [for] accepting,” explained Max. “You can’t always overcome it—suffering is a natural condition of life, so [you have to] come to peace with your suffering, rephrase your suffering and reframe it, then you can find some sort of peace within yourself that will make it easier to endure.”

Seeing his dad weakened by tinnitus, Max spoke to him about suicide following personal events he had experienced recently. He wanted to be sure that Kent was okay. “It was the first time I brought up the subject of suicide, and he shut me down pretty quickly,” Max said.

In fact, their last conversation was about Max “making sure he was not



in that type of place.” Kent made dinner plans with Max for the night that it happened. “So, I felt like he was pushing me off so I wouldn’t ring the alarm bell or do anything,” Max said, adding that, in hindsight, he felt like he’d been misled because his dad could sense he was catching on to what was swirling through his head.

Within hours of Kent taking his life, Max began his last job: being the public voice on the very public death of his father and planning the celebration, not a funeral, of a life well lived. “I just threw myself into it. All hands-on-deck crisis management—kind of what he would do.... I really dove into being there for my family, being there for his friends, being there for the company.”

And Max has continued in the role of supporting others. “When things like [suicide] happen, the last thing you want to do is talk to the world about it.... I couldn’t control his actions or the actions of other people reacting to what he had done, so [Stoic beliefs] helped me to center myself and react immediately to the tragedy,” Max said.

Reflecting on what went wrong, besides his dad’s inability to “accept”

tinnitus, Max thinks his dad should have relinquished control over his treatment. “My advice is don’t be your own quarterback.... [My dad] assembled a group of smart minds from all over the world... to help him with this problem. But in the heat of the game, he was distracted and impatient. I think he was making a lot of rash decisions because he was the one in pain versus the one looking down field for the bigger targets, the longer-term solutions. It’s a lot easier when a professional is helping guide the master plan [when it comes to your health].”

Now, well into year three at Texas Roadhouse, Max hears the promises he made to his dad echo in his mind. “Even though he can’t fulfill his promise to me, I am fulfilling my promise to him, and that helps me sleep at night,” he said. “It’s time for me to grow spiritually and personally. I need to open a new chapter... in my life—one that I had wanted to open but kept closed [because] of [the promise] with my dad.”

And it’s time to heal. Max’s dad instilled in him the drive to pursue goals, to be accountable, to make

things happen. “I want to have a wife and a family one day. And so, I feel it’s not fair for me to not deal with [losing my dad]. I need to take the time to deal with it now so that I don’t have to take other people through it with me in the future,” Max said, acknowledging the danger of compartmentalizing and not addressing tragedy.

In his last year, tinnitus kept Kent from skiing in Utah, a tradition he deeply loved and valued. Shortly after his death, Max went skiing with his dad’s friends in Utah, “We sprinkled some of his ashes [there].” It was a moment to honor and remember a man who loved life, lived boldly and bravely, and took pride in making things happen for himself and others. For Max, part of his process of healing is to continue visiting his father’s favorite ski resorts to spread his ashes. “That’s the first big quest that I plan to finish,” Max said, explaining that he’ll film this chapter of remembrance and reframing so he can share the journey and the stories with his future family to bid a final farewell to the man who touched so many people in such profound ways. 