

# The true face of gambling

## *One Kansas family says it all*

Last year was winding down on a chilly day, Dec. 29, in rural Kansas. David\* sat by his father's grave, warmed by a leather coat that his dad had left him. He wrote a note to his beloved wife. It was Sunday, and she was with her family celebrating a late Christmas – they had been with David's family celebrating, only four days earlier.

His note reasoned that if his family knew the pain, desperation and shame he woke up with every morning, they would not want him to have to go on. David was a licensed counselor with a Master's Degree who manned gambling and suicide hotlines. He was an experienced social worker who routinely talked addicts through their toughest moments. Only a day before, he and his wife, who had doggedly supported him through his secret gambling addiction, had gone to Harrah's (operator for the Prairie Band Potawatomi Indian Nation casino). There he underwent the voluntary humiliation of fingerprinting and paperwork that would ban him from the casino for life.

This Sunday morning he awoke feeling terrible. He persuaded his wife to visit her family without him. Though he had an immediate family of professionals who loved him dearly, two nurses, a physician and an attorney, he was trying to make it on his own. He wanted to fight the monster in secret, but he couldn't. Sometime during that day, he went to the Golden Eagle Casino, a bit beyond Harrah's. He lost again.

He traveled to St. John, the small Kansas farm town where he had grown up and where the father he revered was buried. He took his shotgun, a memento from brighter days with his dad, and his only firearm. He put the gun in his mouth and pulled the trigger.

"I would rather take a beating than walk into a casino," says his sister, Kathy Bassett at her home in Topeka Kansas. "I hate casinos! They killed my brother."

And Kathy has more reasons than David's death for hating them.

Her mother, now 73, had her condominium paid for and enough retirement to make ends meet. But in the late 1990's, she discovered casinos only 20 minutes away from her Topeka home. Now she's back working full time as a nurse. She has to pay off a \$1600 a month Chapter 13 bankruptcy judgment – a direct result of her new gambling addiction.

And there's more. Kathy Bassett's son went to work for Harrah's when it opened nearly a decade ago. He was a good blackjack dealer, and transferred to Nevada to work at a Harrah's-owned casino there, becoming a "pit boss" and trusted member of the team. Somehow, he found a way to embezzle funds from the casino to support his own gambling, lifestyle and charitable interests. "He was acting



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like Robin Hood,” Kathy explains, giving money to impoverished friends and trying to help the family.

Nevada, where the gaming commission holds sway in every political circle, is no place to be caught cheating a casino. Despite his spotless record, his stacks of character references, his three children and his supportive family, Jason 28, was to become an example to all casino employees. His Nevada judge handed down the maximum sentence for a single offense—four to 10 years in the penitentiary.

Jason’s wife and children have moved to Kansas where Kathy will help them until he is released and can begin making payments on hundreds of thousands of dollars in restitution. “He’ll never pay it off,” Kathy says.

She misses her son, and she feels every day like her brother David should come walking through the doorway, but he never does.

“If we had only known,” she laments. “I would have taken a leave of absence and stuck myself to him like a tick.” David was her only sibling. “We were as close as a brother and sister could ever be.”

On her son’s behalf, she also regrets, “I should have known. He gave money to my mother and helped my brother. He said he had won the money gambling. I just should have known that isn’t possible.”

The Bassett family story is a consummate synopsis of the ABC’s of gambling – Addiction, Bankruptcy and Crime. NCALG has been telling state governments for years that the deadly alphabet of misery will arrive on community doorsteps three to five years after casinos open. The Bassett family provides living – and dying – proof. The Kansas legislators and governor went chasing down the golden brick road of a gambling fairy tale, somehow trusting that the social costs could be ignored with a simple click of the heels. So much like the story of Dorothy looking for Oz, we find “this isn’t Kansas” anymore. It’s a road leading to a false wizard with too many broken families along the way.

Someone could have taken better care to protect the Bassett family. Someone should have tried to keep Kansas safe from gambling predators. That “someone” was the State of Kansas. Kansas has four legalized Indian casinos, and Governor Kathleen Sebelius has twice introduced bills to open state-owned “destination casinos,” slots at the race tracks and slots at fraternal and veterans organizations. Grassroots organizations including Stand Up for Kansas have been successful in stopping the governor’s deadly expansion plans.

At last September’s NCALG conference, National Gambling Impact Study Commission member Richard Leone noted the vice of gambling is different from others. This time, “It’s government kicking down the doors.”

The whole thing began with a small slot machine win during a vacation we took in Las Vegas to see some shows there. We gambled a little just for fun, but that wasn’t the reason for the trip. That win hooked him and gradually he began going to the casinos close to Topeka.

Their rewards club offerings would get him to go up there just to receive the little incentive gift or whatever. But then he would end up gambling – sometimes thousands of dollars in a night. I told him that the “VIP” on the members’ rewards card should really stand for “Very Impaired Person.” Eventually he came to a point where he absolutely hated the casinos, but he couldn’t stop himself anymore.

What was worse is that, as a mental health professional, he was very aware of his addiction and

was humiliated by it. He felt horrible that his work was to help others with their compulsions, yet he couldn’t control his own. It tore him up. He was too ashamed to even go for help. He felt that banning himself from Harrah’s might be enough of a barrier, but obviously it wasn’t.

Harrah’s “official position” that they don’t want problem gamblers is a lie. They wouldn’t have “platinum” players’ club levels if they didn’t want compulsive gamblers. If you ever see the casino hold an event for their high rollers, most of them look like they don’t have enough money to pay for the basic necessities of life. David gambled \$113,000 in 2003, and nobody at Harrah’s ever blinked an eye.

-- comments from David’s widow

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In fact, nowhere are the stakes higher, the odds worse and gambling addiction more rampant than in the halls of state government.

From California to New York, a handful of states continue to hammer their citizens with the deadly brew of money and lies. Gambling knows no regional boundaries, and it crosses party lines. Republican Robert Ehrlich of Maryland and neighboring Democrat "Fast Eddie" Rendell of Pennsylvania ran their campaigns on promises of tax relief through the magic of gambling. They've pitched their programs like card sharks in black suits, dealing the ubiquitous lie, "A painless revenue stream."

In Pennsylvania, Rendell hammered his legislature with multiple sessions of schemes to make slot machines look like lower property taxes. The debate turned to a greed-fest as racetracks vied with cities and parlors for the right to fleece the public. Pennsylvania had suffered along with all Americans in the loss of industry. Its steel mills and textile factories had been pounded by overseas competition. Racetracks complained they were being driven under by competition from nearby gambling states. They convinced legislators that they deserved government subsidies through state sanctioned slot machines. They were poised to become the new "steal mills" of Pennsylvania.

Then one late summer night as the legislature neared the end of what appeared to be yet another slotless session, the halls of Harrisburg echoed the whispers of a closed back-room game. The bills were shuffled, cut and dealt by a master politician, Vince Fumo. It was he, they say, who had held the tracks at bay so many months before. Now, Fumo had his chance to stack the deck his way, and by the wee hours of the morning, Pennsylvania was losing large.

Without hearings, public debate or citizen comment, the midnight machinations of the legislature folded the state's hand. By dawn, the sun rose on a new state of "Slotsylvania," with a proposed 61,000 machines legalized – the largest concentration of slot machines outside of Nevada. The legislation allows slots at the tracks, in the cities, and in tourist centers, putting the money sucking menaces within addiction range of the majority of Pennsylvania citizens. Within weeks, some legislators are already talking up table games to transform the state into a virtual "PennsylVegas," the Nevada of the east.

How can a legislature hope to model its state after Nevada? Nevada—the state with the highest suicide rate in the nation, the most dangerous state in the nation to live, the state with the nation's highest divorce rate, and the state where the most women are killed by men.

This kind of legislation shouldn't be happening, and if we can move our program faster and farther, it will quit happening. When we can reach more people with stories like Kathy Bassett's, people will push their legislators to vote right! Voters and legislators need to know where this deadly road leads. We've won in Missouri, and threatening referendums in the District of Columbia and Rhode Island have been pulled from the ballots.

Across the nation, in states where gambling has matured, legislators are beginning to understand

gambling taxes come at a huge cost, but they admit they're addicted to, and trapped by, gambling revenues. As gambling transfers wealth from legitimate commerce, other businesses fail, killing the traditional tax base. States become dependent on gambling, and as social costs rise, they respond by allowing and even encouraging more and more gambling. Before long, Kansas isn't Kansas anymore.

Too many governors would rather listen to big money than to pleading citizens. Gambling industry executives haunt the halls of nearly every state in the nation, looking for ever bigger bets, and paying ever smaller pots. Kathy Bassett has called, e-mailed and hand written Governor Sebelius, and has yet to receive her first acknowledgement. The fairy tale of fast money and the jangle of slots have drowned out the pleas of families in the office of the Kansas governor.

Gambling lobbyists and PR firms are hard to beat. In Missouri, gambling expansionists spent nearly \$10 million trying to pry a casino into Rockaway Beach, a small town near Branson. An opposition movement, funded almost entirely by a Christian-based family entertainment company, beat them with a \$1.5 million campaign.

That winning campaign's slogan was "Show Me You Care!"

Well, we all care, and care deeply about families like Kathy Bassett's. We can't help but wonder if we could have warned the people of Kansas about what they were inviting into their communities. If we had, one wonders if Jason might be home with his family, and David might be walking through Kathy's front door.

Kathy wrote to NCALG last week, charging us to "Use our story, and my voice. Shout it loud and clear." So we shall, with all the voices and budget we have. "But," she added, "this is not enough. Help me, and I will help you in whatever way I can."

Today, dear friends, we are again asking for your help so we can help other families dodge the pain felt by the Bassett family and so many others.

If it were not for them, there would be no reason to fight gambling. But these are real families in real anguish, tens of thousands of them growing in numbers into the millions, and their pain is real. We want to help states like Pennsylvania better understand what will become of their families four or five years down the road when gambling matures. We need to turn the tide.

This November we're facing referenda in Florida, Nebraska, Oklahoma, and California. Millions of Americans are standing a vote away from being in harms way. These are huge, dangerous battles!

Will you help us again, and give generously to the fight? Together, we can stop states from selling their citizens to the deadly addiction, bankruptcy and crime that follow gambling.

In today's brand of American politics, it takes dollars to have a voice and to spread the word. Please give all you can, so that we can do more -- so we can convince more citizens and more legislators that the story of Kathy Bassett's family is the true story of gambling.

Stay with the fight!



Tom Grey  
Executive Director  
National Coalition Against Legalized Gambling

\* We have omitted David's last name, and others, in respect for the family's privacy. Kathy Bassett, however, is ready to battle the casino industry that has devastated her family. She can be reached through e-mail at [tropical\\_girl56@hotmail.com](mailto:tropical_girl56@hotmail.com)