

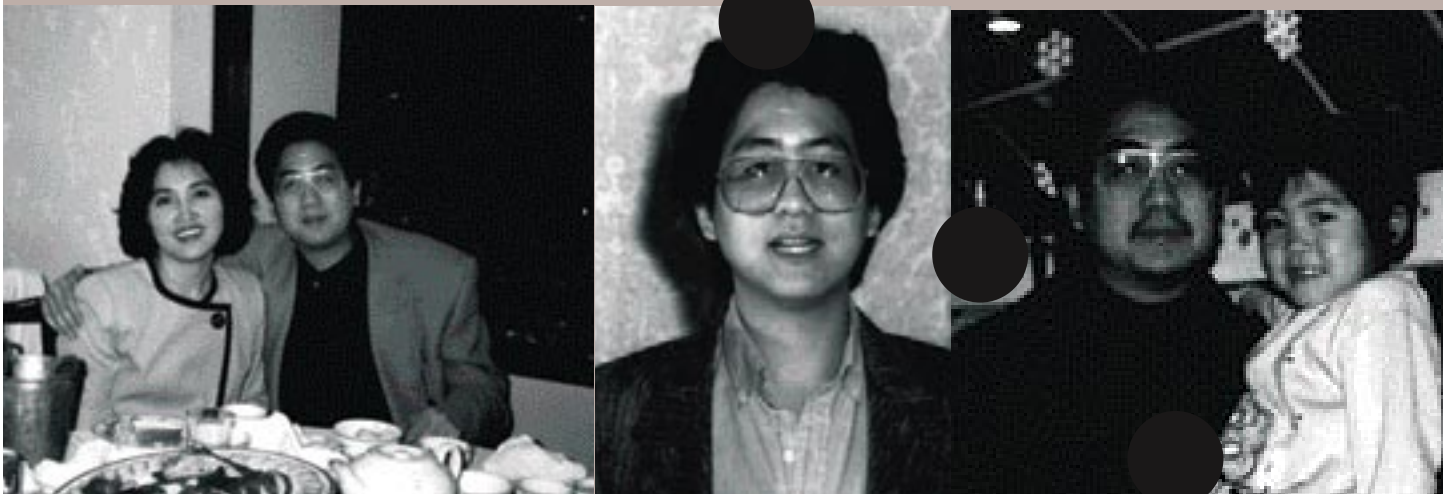
PIECES OF A **DREAM:** A STORY OF GAMBLING

by MICHELLE WONG

When Phillip Wong committed suicide, his family responded with silence. But his sister, Calgary filmmaker Michelle Wong, needed to find out why Phillip took his own life. So she focused her camera on his family and friends—and on herself—to find some answers.

The result of her search, *Pieces of a Dream: A Story of Gambling*, was produced by the National Film Board. The documentary, which premiered at the Calgary International Film Festival in September 2003 and has been aired on CBC, details Phillip's "lonely spiral into desperation, isolation and depression." Filmed in the family's hometown, St. Paul, as well as Las Vegas, *Pieces of a Dream* is an intimate exploration of one man's addiction. The following edited transcript links together Michelle's voice-over narration and her on-camera comments.

Images courtesy of Michelle Wong



My brother was 36 years old when he committed suicide. The first reaction from the family was not to talk about his death. That somehow in that silence, the shame of what happened would fade away.

He was a father with two young children. After he died, the police came around asking me questions. Phillip hadn't left a suicide note and I began to wonder if he really had killed himself. My family wanted to bury the tragedy and move on, but I couldn't stop thinking about him.

When you grow up in a fragmented family, you learn to accept the secrets. I wanted to start asking questions. I had to talk to everyone: my family, my brother's ex-wife, my stepfather, Phillip's best friend. I hoped that by gathering these pieces together, I could begin to understand what happened to him.

St. Paul, Alberta, wasn't just where my brother died; it's where our story began.

My family owned a Chinese restaurant on main street. It was our second home. My sister worked the cash register and waited on tables. My brother and I helped out in the kitchen with my mom. A break to the routine would come every Sunday when my father would take us to Edmonton to eat dim sum. My brother and I would have contests to see who could eat the most sticky rice wraps. He still holds the record at seven. I guess I would say we had a normal childhood.

Things changed for me significantly in 1980. My mother and father split up; it was a turning point in my life. Suddenly everything that had made sense didn't make sense. I think the way I took it and the way my brother took it were very different. We lived in the same house and we saw each other every day, but we never actually sat down and talked to each other about what we were feeling and what it was like to have my mother leave.

My mother eventually remarried and settled in Las Vegas. In the middle of his second year of university, my brother quit school and joined my mother. He never told me why he left and I never asked.

When Phillip arrived in Vegas, he worked odd jobs and helped my mother run her gift store. They also had a cheque cashing business, so he used to be a runner. I think the things my brother learned in Vegas were "street smart" things. But he didn't go to school; he didn't develop any particular kind of career. He was a Jack of all trades. My brother had a lot of charm. People liked him.

In 1994 I went to see my mom. I felt like there had been this long division between mother and daughter and I wanted to deal with my emotions and anger about her leaving. I went to Las Vegas and I stayed for about four months; I got to know my brother a bit more. He had gotten married to a Taiwanese woman named Min, who was a U.S. citizen. They had opened their own business, a beauty salon, and my brother was helping her manage it, because he was quite a smart business guy even though he hadn't gone to school. And right around that time I saw my brother...the amount of money he was handling at the time. Like, he would literally pull out of his pants pocket, you know, hundred dollar bills and count them off.

And I was just... I was really impressed.... At that time, Las Vegas was growing; it was a money town and hundred dollar bills were very common.... Money was flowing into that city like crazy. And he was part of that prosperity: wife, two kids—twins, a boy and a girl—and they had this new house. He was driving a Lexus and wearing fancy jewellery, and I think that to him he was hitting his stride in his early 30s as somebody who had



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everything. It was obvious that parts of his life, in terms of the American dream, were falling into place.

The El Cortez is an interesting casino for me because when I would come visit, late at night Phillip would say, “Hey, let’s go out and shoot some craps.” The first place he would take me to is El Cortez, number one because he worked there. But number two, they have quarter craps. So we could put \$10 on the table, get 40 chips and actually play a decent game. The only time I really saw my brother gamble was when he was working at El Cortez; it was his shift off and I just happened to have some money. I had \$500 with me. When we went to the table I thought, “Wouldn’t it be neat to see \$500 worth of chips?” So I gave my brother the \$500, he turned it into chips and then he started gambling right away. Within 10 minutes, it was all gone. And I was sort of in shock, you know, like, “Phillip! That was 500 of my dollars.” And he just sort of—you know, he was very *laissez faire* about it. He said, “Oh don’t worry about it. I’ll pay you back.”

I went back to Canada without realizing the significance that world had begun to play in his life. And I didn’t realize that what I was seeing was private and that he was sharing a secret with me. I wondered who else knew?

Gambling was always part of our life growing up. It was a form of entertainment, a fun distraction. I was becoming aware that this was more than just a pastime for Phillip. When did gambling become something he couldn’t control? How did it go from entertainment to something so serious? What does it take to change someone? Do they just gamble until they’re destroyed? Until there’s nothing?

Maybe that’s it. Maybe they won’t stop until there’s nothing. Until everything has been pawned, sold. It’s like drugs. It doesn’t stop until you stop.

My brother was covering his gambling losses by telling each person a different story. He had created a huge web of deceit.

He would come see my mom and ask her for money. And he threatened her once. He wanted \$5,000. My mother said no. My brother said that he would take a gun and he would shoot himself, Min and the kids if she didn’t give him the money.

The gambling became really, really obvious. My brother was under a lot of pressure, I think. My mother was hiding money in a box of soap and my brother had gone over to my mother’s house to do some laundry. He took the box of soap down and discovered the money. And there was about \$7,000. So he took the money and he went on a huge gambling binge. People couldn’t find him for three days and nights.

After that binge, my brother went back to his house. He had lost all his money. Min was having an argument with her ex-husband, Mike. She wanted him out of the house and he wouldn’t go. So Min went to my brother and said, “Mike won’t get out of the house.” My brother went to his closet, pulled out a gun, went downstairs and shot Mike.

Mike recovered. My brother was tried and sent to prison. In prison his gambling stopped. By then, we were all afraid of Phillip. Looking back, we knew so little about what was going on in him. I thought the shooting was a jealous act, the anger toward an ex-husband, not the anger from the binge of a gambling loss.

After a year in prison, Phillip was given a choice: more jail time or deportation

to Canada. He returned to St. Paul, the place he’d escaped from 20 years earlier.

Back in Alberta, Phillip reunited with our father, whom he hadn’t seen in more than 15 years. Within a few months, however, he started gambling again. In a chance conversation with some of his acquaintances, I later learned he’d started selling drugs to feed his gambling habit. He fell down a slippery slope and did not return.

I think Phillip’s fall from grace was a big thing for him. Maybe much more than I realized. I think, from a cultural standpoint, for Chinese people, face is very important. And I think he literally lost his face. So he ended up at the bottom.

I read in a book that over 50 per cent of people who struggle with a serious gambling addiction contemplate suicide as a way out. When I read that, I began to understand the choice my brother made. Maybe he didn’t tell me about his gambling problem because he was my big brother, a person I’d looked up to all my life, and part of him didn’t want me to see that he wasn’t perfect. In his death, we all struggled and blamed ourselves.

It’s taken me a long time to accept that my brother was a compulsive gambler, because in some ways I didn’t want to see it, and in other ways I didn’t want to accept what I was seeing. I have to accept it now because it’s the reason he died. It’s not because my parents got divorced. It’s not because he wasn’t working a good job. It’s because he was dealing with this illness and he was dealing with it by himself.

MICHELLE WONG is a Calgary filmmaker. *Pieces of a Dream: A Story of Gambling* is available for purchase via www.nfb.ca. The website also has details about upcoming screenings.