

Parents turn loss after crash into purpose

By telling their stories, many hope their heartbreak can help prevent future tragedies

By Melanie Eversley
USA TODAY

Sherry Chapman and her son, Ryan Ramirez, had a special bond. They shared the same birthday, Nov. 18. Maybe once a month they said to each other something Ryan told his mother when he was 3: "I love you how much big is the sky."

When Chapman got a call on Dec. 7, 2002, that her 19-year-old son had died in a car crash, she says, her life dropped to the floor. Ramirez had been riding in the front passenger seat with a drunken driver.

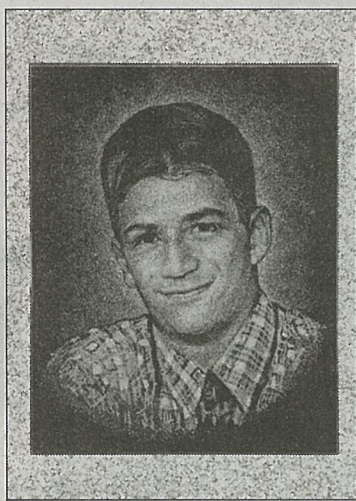
"You don't think you can go on without your child, but you get up out of bed and you take a step and you brush your teeth, and suddenly you look back and realize you've been living for quite some time after your child's death," says Chapman, of Coventry, Conn.

Chapman is one of thousands of parents annually who lose children to auto accidents — many caused by someone texting, talking on a phone, driving while intoxicated or otherwise distracted. She and other parents hope that by sharing their stories, they can turn heartbreak into something positive and prevent tragedies.

Young people 15 to 24 are 14% of the population but account for 30%, or \$19 billion, of the medical and other costs of motor vehicle injuries every year among males, and 28%, or \$7 billion, among females, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. The CDC finds teens are more likely than older drivers to underestimate driving dangers, and they have the lowest rate of seat belt use.

When Chapman's son died, she joined a support group and found a bond with another mother in the group. A third mother tracked her down after reading a newspaper article about Ryan's accident. The three formed Mourning Parents ACT, or !MPACT, and they began speaking to young people in Connecticut about drunken and distracted driving.

Chapman, a former paralegal, is sharing the raw details of her ordeal — touching the cold, ashen skin of



On grave marker: Ryan Ramirez was killed in a car crash in 2002.



Mundane things still haunt her: Sherry Chapman of Coventry, Conn., sits by the grave of her son Ryan Ramirez. Chapman and others speak several times a year to young people in New England about the dangers of distracted or drunken driving.

Photos by Stan Godlewski for USA TODAY



Sharing raw details of her ordeal: Sherry Chapman joined other parents who had lost children to form !MPACT, or Mourning Parents Act.

her son at the hospital, telling him one last time, "I love you how much big is the sky" — with schoolkids and other audiences throughout New England, and lobbying for tougher laws to promote safety among teen drivers and passengers.

"Some people ask, 'How can you relieve that again and again?' But that's something that we live whether we're talking about it or not," Chapman says.

The two women who worked with her in !MPACT have moved on. Chapman speaks by herself, sharing the stark, mundane things that still haunt her — the silence of the house where there used to be constant phone calls and music, the mystery of the spoiled milk in her refrigerator.

"One day I went shopping and I went to grab a gallon of milk, and I suddenly realized that I knew why the milk was spoiling," she says. "We were still buying milk for Ryan. I stood there at the milk case and was crying."

Jeanne and Johnny Mac Brown of Wellman, Texas, lost a child to a car accident, too. Alex Brown, 17, not wearing a seat belt, was e-mailing on her phone on Nov. 10, 2009, when she lost control of her Chevy Silverado. She was thrown from the truck, and it rolled over her.

Johnny Mac Brown, 53, a consultant for a synthetic lubricant company, is vice president of the foundation the couple named for their daughter. He never enjoyed public

speaking.

Still, a couple of weeks after Alex died, the Browns began speaking at schools across Texas. If the venue has the space, they are likely to tow her wrecked truck, twisted and bent, to show the severity of the crash.

In January 2011, TV's *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition* gave them a new home to replace their aging trailer and house the Remember Alex Brown Foundation. The foundation got \$150,000. The publicity resulted in a boost on Facebook and more speaking engagements. They tour the country. In the 2010-11 school year, they spoke 179 times.

Jeanne Brown, 45, who left her job teaching technology in secondary school to become president of the foundation, wants young people to feel responsibility for what could happen to them and their families.

In her talks, she offers some harsh reality: "I'm honest with them about how, if you're going to continue to text and drive, make sure your family has health insurance, life insurance on you. Then, I encourage them to start thinking about their own funeral so that their parents aren't having to deal with all that, because they're just trying to get through a day without you."

Psychologist Therese Rando, whose practice in Warwick, R.I., focuses on bereaved parents, says her clients search for ways to cope.

"When there's a sudden death, there's been no context. It is a sudden, shocking, abrupt disconnection, and you cannot grasp it," explains Rando, clinical director of the Institute for the Study and Treatment of Loss. "The only way we can actually grasp it is by going over it and realiz-

ing the implications of it. ... Some of these people who tell the story of what happened are very slowly coming to grips with it themselves."

There are three chief reasons why some parents whose children have died suddenly and violently choose to speak publicly, Rando says:

► It makes them feel they're doing something constructive. "One of the things that people do is try to make something good come out of this horrific event because then, to them, it can have some meaning," Rando says.

► It is a way to keep a connection to the child. "It's important for human beings to have connections with people they've loved and lost," Rando says.

► It honors the child. It gives the parents a way to talk about the child's good qualities.

Not all such parents have healthy reasons for throwing themselves into public speaking, Rando says. For some, their speeches are a way to hold onto the child because they have not accepted the death, Rando says.

Jeanne Brown and Sherry Chapman are sure they are doing the right thing. "This generation is awesome," Brown says. "They're the ones that can turn this tide of the death cost of texting and driving."

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