

Special Letter

Two car tragedies were not similar

By Shawn M. Kahle / The Detroit News

I am a regular reader of Marney Rich Keenan and appreciate her ability to capture life's simple lessons. Unfortunately, in her zeal to create a linkage between the recent tragic deaths of Grosse Pointe teens and her 11-year-old daughter's first independent trip to the pool, she set accuracy aside at the expense of the memory of Ashley Marie Easterbrook and her friends.

In her Aug. 4 column headlined "Teens' fatal car accident seems all too similar to past tragic accidents," Keenan implies that Ashley and her friends Andy Stindt and Michael Jamieson in 1997 piled into a car, were partying and speeding, and felt invisible. In every respect, Keenan is wrong.

Ashley and her two friends had been at a coffee shop; they had not been drinking, and they were not speeding. Ashley and her friends wore their seat belts, and they were heading home in time to meet their designated curfews. Ashley was five days away from graduation. Her degree was granted posthumously and her parents and brother held her graduation party as a rainbow broke through the sky -- symbolically helping her friends and family mourn and celebrate her life. Ashley was a member of Students Against Drunk Driving. Ironically, in her diary, she prayed for the safety of her loved ones from the dangers of drunk drivers.

The Easterbrook family, along with the families of her friends, mounted an awareness campaign within weeks of burying their children that lives on today. Its intent is to help drivers of all ages become more aware of the dangers of drinking and driving and solicit the help of others in identifying those who have been over-served or who should not be behind the wheel of a car. You see, Ashley and her friends were not brazenly taking teenage risks. Rather, their fate was in the path of an adult who drank too much and then sped through an intersection.

What, if anything, was the same? Certainly not the "circumstances," but perhaps a few lessons.

People who have been drinking should not drive. People should not speed through neighborhoods or intersections. And whether it is a bar that over-serves adult patrons, or parents who allow underage party goers to celebrate graduation, drink and then drive, there should be accountability that reaches far broader than the teen or adult behind the wheel.

I would encourage Keenan to extend her apologies to the Easterbrook family, as well as to the families of her friends Andy Stindt and Michael Jamieson.

I also encourage Keenan to keep writing about the dangers, causes and consequences of drinking and driving.

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