



For Ashley, against drunken driving

Internet scholarship site puts father's memorial into high gear

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When David Easterbrook of Troy posted two \$4,000 scholarships online last year in memory of his daughter, Ashley, he didn't get much response. After a year, he had received just six applications for the money and 23,000 visits by people who were interested.

Easterbrook, vice president of customer service for Kmart in Troy, had created the scholarships to draw attention to drunken driving, so he was especially disappointed by the trickle of people.

But on March 15 this year, just two weeks before the application deadline, scholarship search site FastWeb (www.fastweb.com) picked up his address and broadcast it to the eligible students on its list of 9 million people. By the deadline, the site had had 151,621 visits and about 3,000 applications had been filed from around the world, including Zimbabwe, Romania and Iran.

The scholarships are among several set up in Ashley's memory. Easterbrook still remembers the night they were created: June 3, 1997, the night Ashley was killed. It was five days before her high school graduation.

He and his wife, Gail, sat on their basement stairs and talked about what they were going to do. It was 3:30 in the morning, two hours after they had been told their oldest child was dead at 18.

"My God, we have to have a funeral," he said.

"I know," she said.

"I don't want flowers," he said. "I hate the smell of flowers at funerals."

"Why not ask people to contribute to a scholarship?" she asked. "That's what Ashley would have wanted."

It was the beginning of the Foundation for Ashley's Dream, which gives away more than \$70,000 a year and has a national reputation for lobbying for harsher treatment of drunken driving offenders. But then it was just one way to cope.

"It was a way to keep her with us," David Easterbrook said. "It was something for us to hang on to."

Within a matter of weeks, friends and caring strangers had donated more than \$50,000 toward scholarships for students at Troy High and Troy Athens High, where Ashley and two of her friends also killed in the crash had gone to school. Other scholarships were for students who would have been in Ashley's class at the University of Michigan, and for the children of police officers.

All have high school grade point average requirements of 2.75 to 3.74, in honor of Ashley, who was unable to qualify for most scholarships because she didn't have a straight-A average.

"She worked very hard for her 3.55 G.P.A. She worked hard for her admission to the U-M nursing school," Easterbrook said. "To hell with 4.0s. If you get a 3.75 or higher, you don't qualify."

A board of directors came together to oversee the foundation, and the campaign continued to pick up steam. A partnership with Infinity Outdoor resulted in 110 billboards around the Detroit area (a new campaign begins next month). The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration picked Ashley as the focus of a television campaign last year.

When assistant treasurer Paul Kozowicz, the chief financial officer at Morrell Inc., suggested a Web site about a year ago, Easterbrook said he was dubious.

"My initial reaction was, if I build a memorial to my daughter on a Web site, who wants to read about her and cry?" he said. "But does it make me feel good? You bet."

So the site went up. And as Easterbrook became more active in the fight against drunken driving, information about the cause began to dominate the site, and the number of visitors slowly started to rise. Kozowicz suggested putting a scholarship on the site that anyone in the world could apply for, and Easterbrook agreed.

But the site still attracted just a few visitors, and the applications didn't come. In early March, Easterbrook called Mike and Carol Galle of Special D Events, who were managing the scholarship, because he hadn't heard anything. They told him only six people had applied.

"Man, I'm really disappointed," he told them. "But OK, that's the way it is."

It was two weeks later when he got the call: Go to the site. Something's happening.

He went, and he just stared at the counter that indicates how many people had come to visit. It was already thousands more than when he had seen it last. And as he sat and watched, the number grew.

"I would hit the refresh button every 45 seconds and there would be 100 more hits," he said. "I called everyone I knew and said, 'Go and hit the refresh button!' I was floored."

Then the e-mail started to pour in. He would get home from work to find 200, then 300, then 350 messages waiting for him.

"There were more coming in faster than I could respond and close them," Easterbrook said. "I laughed, but then I suddenly got very nervous. We have a monster. It's huge."

Easterbrook continues to try and respond to many of the messages. Meanwhile, Special D Events sifts through the applications, weeding out those who don't meet the criteria. A small committee, including Gail Easterbrook, will choose 10 finalists and call the principals and guidance counselors from their schools.

They hope to choose the winners by the end of April.

Thousands of students turned in applications that described in painful detail how their lives had been touched by drunken driving.

"One of my dear friends decided that she had enough power to get behind the wheel after she had too much to drink," wrote Rebecca Daneff of Holt, a senior at Holt High hoping to enroll in French, math or teaching at Michigan State University in the fall. "She ended up on the wrong side of the highway, struck an oncoming car and killed the driver in that vehicle."

The accident happened while the family lived in Muskegon, said her father, Phillip.

"It made a profound impact on her."

Thousands more visitors to the site wrote to say they weren't there to apply but had themselves been the victim of drunken drivers, either personally or as the relative or friend of a victim, or even as a member of a family in which someone drove drunk.

"I have a close friend that was killed in an automobile accident last year," said Elise Reitmeyer of Lancaster, Pa. "My friend, Cathy, would be happy to know that people don't forget. They live on through the love they leave behind."

"I was looking for scholarship info for my son and in a matter of seconds (went from) worrying about where college money was coming from to thanking God for my children's lives," said Evelyn Wheeler of Lampasas, Texas. "Thank you, Ashley, for the reminder."

Easterbrook read all the e-mail, and his voice shakes with the power of it.

"You start hearing these stories from kids," he said. "It's the pit of your stomach, that little knot, that sick feeling. You're driven to want to help. To help them all. The foundation is not that big. Our arms aren't big enough to get around the issue."

"The pain that people go through" -- he stops, angrily blowing out a deep breath -- "they don't have to go through it. It's not curing cancer. It's senseless, and useless and so preventable."

But the news isn't good. NHTSA released its preliminary numbers for 2000 a few days ago, and the number of drunken driving accidents is up for the first time in six years.

"We're not doing enough," Easterbrook says with finality, as if the Foundation for Ashley's Dream could single-handedly wipe out the problem.

"I want to stand on a tall building and scream and shout," he said.

"People say, 'Dave, you're nuts.' I want the world to know just how mad I am. To be taken so cheaply, by such a raw, dirt, earth-level act.... There's no reason for that. We can prevent that."

For information on the Foundation for Ashley's Dream, visit www.ashleysdream.org or call 248-740-1802, 8 a.m.-5 p.m. weekdays.

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