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One life helps others

Daughter a victim of drunken driver; Troy parents make her death matter

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It's spring again.

So it's time for the Easterbrook household in Troy to be piled with thousands of oversized envelopes from across the country. And time to find those special essays that make Gail cry, and make David shake his fist and say "Look at this! This kid gets it!"

The couple will open and read every application for the annual scholarships they award, aimed at fighting the social evil that ended their daughter's life in the blush of youth. It was 10 years ago this spring when Troy police delivered the devastating news: 18-year-old Ashley Marie Easterbrook was dead, killed by a drunken driver.

According to police, the impact of the speeding, red-light-running car also killed two of Ashley's teenage friends from Troy -- Michael Jamieson and Andrew Stindt, both 19. The drunken driver who hit the teenagers' car, at Long Lake and Crooks, survived, only to die a few hours later on a hospital operating table.

Confronted by such a loss, many families retreat from the world. Instead, the parents of the Troy youths all became outspoken activists, supporters of Mothers Against Drunk Driving and founders of scholarships. "We're all out for the same



In 1997, the daughter of David and Gail Easterbrook was killed by a drunken driver. The couple, both 55 and of Troy, began a foundation of scholarships for kids who write the best essays on binge drinking and drunken driving. On April 7, the Easterbrooks read through some of this year's essay submissions that have come in from all over the country.

cause," said Gail, 55, poring over the piles of mail so large she must pick them up each spring with her husband's truck.

In the fight against alcohol abuse, however, the Easterbrooks have pushed the envelope -- many thousands of them, actually, in awarding scholarships, setting David's nationwide schedule of speeches and mailing countless blue-rubber bracelets that say "Ashley's Dream." The bracelets go out to those who donate after visiting www.ashleysdream.org. They have four little symbols on them -- a smiley face, a peace sign, a heart and a cross. "Those were in her diary, every entry," her mother recalled. "And the cross has marks on it, like it's shining. That's what we have on her marker at the cemetery," she said.

Around Oakland County, the couple paid to replace the makeshift temporary memorials at sites of fatal crashes involving alcohol with 20 large signs. Each says: "Drunk Driving: You Can't Afford It," a phrase the Easterbrooks coined after learning of studies showing that some alcoholics respond most to financial penalties.

David, also 55, a former Kmart executive, now has his own business, selling industrial-storage equipment, called AME Vertical, named after Ashley's initials. His business partner? Ashley's high school boyfriend, Drew Patrick, 28, of Royal Oak. Gail and David's son, Adam Easterbrook, 26, who lives in Orion Township, just became the father of a daughter, named Kaia Ashley Easterbrook.

The family nurtures a friendly though unflappable obsession to remember Ashley while fighting the social evil that killed her. Last week, David and Gail sat surrounded by scholarship applications, each containing a student's essay on the perils of alcohol.

Gail said, "I can't tell you what I'm looking for, exactly. I don't want statistics. "I want to hear a story, something from the heart. I remember one a few years ago, from a girl in Florida. She'd been in a crash and went through the windshield. "Kids would tease her about her scars, and when she got to high school her mother said, 'Do you want plastic surgery?' She said, 'No, I want to keep my scars because when people ask me, I can tell them what happened.' "Can you believe that? When I called her to tell her she won, I'm bawling my eyes out. That's the kind of story that gets me."



So many essays come in each spring the Easterbrooks use a truck to get them to the house.

Many of the essays describe parents who provide alcohol to parties held by their underage children, she said. "The parents want to be their kids' best friend. But deep down, the kids want them to be parents. They want them to say no. We see that in the essays."

The Ashley Marie Easterbrook Scholarship doesn't require a minimum grade-point average; it has a *maximum*, said David. The ceiling of 3.75 -- equivalent to an A-minus average -- is geared toward "getting kids who were like Ashley, all-around students," he said. They began by offering the scholarships at Troy's two high schools, expanded it to local police officers' children and ultimately rolled the program nationwide on the Internet.

The couple estimates they have awarded \$300,000 so far, some of it their own money, some of it from fund-raisers. This year, they have scaled back and plan to give \$1,000 to each of two winners.

"We've got 100,000 kids a year reading Ashley's story on the Web site. Every one of those kids took the time to read about Ashley, and then a lot of them took the time to write these essays," David said.

"When I saw her at the morgue, I said, 'It just can't end this way. Her life has to have some meaning,' " he said, adding: "That's really what it's all about -- that she didn't die in vain."