

Cynthia Walter

I am Ben's mother. I am here to speak with you today, about the dangers of drinking and driving. To support Ben and Linda's message. The incident on June 15, 2005 affected two families, two communities and many friends. Like Linda said--These are the events you don't hear or read about in the paper. The events that occurred that year continue to affect all of our lives. I call these "Life Changing Events".

I want to tell you about my son, Benjamin. Ben graduated from Wilson in 2005 and was to pursue a career in Architectural Design at Lincoln Tech in Allentown on July 5<sup>th</sup>, 2005. I was just so happy for Ben to be graduating and taking that next big step in his life.

But before he was to take that step, he set off to be with his friends at Senior Week in OC, MD. A week that was meant to be "FUN". "FUN in the Sun, I believe was the expression. Just like all the seniors ---- "Everyone is going, I will be fine."

I struggled with letting him go – I even discussed it with friends and my husband. He'll be fine – let him go. It was one decision that I wish I could take back. To this day, I wish I had said "no". But I can't change that.

I gave him the usual parent – teenager speech. "I know that you will be partying – but, please don't drink and drive. Be responsible." The speech that should have discouraged drinking not approved of it!

He left June 10<sup>th</sup>. We spoke everyday; last speaking around 5 PM on the 14<sup>th</sup>. He was getting ready to go and get something to eat. He was having a great time. Ben said "I love you mom" before hanging up.

NOW – I WANT you to imagine – you as a parent or your mother/parents getting a phone call at 12:30 AM – to be awakened from a sound sleep. The phone call that every parent dreads receiving. “Mrs. Walter this is Jeff. Ben has been arrested. He hit a pedestrian. We think the pedestrian is dead.” I thought I was dreaming or it was a cruel joke. I began screaming hysterically. Frantically I tried Ben’s cell phone – voice mail. Again – voice mail. Again and again --- voice mail. I pleaded for him to answer and assure me that he was OK. But that never happened. I was alone and had to call my husband home from work. All I could do was scream hysterically on the phone, Ben--- hit pedestrian, jail.

---My worst nightmare. I kept pacing through the house, crying. Another family is getting their phone call --- their worst nightmare.

I called OC Police – they had no information and if they did, wouldn’t tell me – he was 18, an ADULT.

My next phone call --- Ben’s father and stepmother. I remember his hysteria and crying.

Ben’s father and I headed to OC by 3:30 a.m. It was the longest ride of my life, the uncertainty, the apprehension and fear. We had no definite answers. The tears would not stop.

7:30 a.m. – arrived at OC Police Dept. We were told we couldn’t see him – Ben was an adult. A detective came to speak with us in a small room off of the lobby. I don’t remember much, only that he validated our worst fear. Ben was driving and intoxicated. The pedestrian was dead – an 18 year old male from PA. Ben would be arraigned sometime today – they were very busy with “Senior Week”; too many to arraign; 150 extra shifts of cops on duty. We were told to just keep checking back for his arraignment time.

I thought that I was going to DIE. I had to leave and sit on the curb outside. I wanted to wake up from this horrible nightmare.

I don't remember driving to the diner where we made our first phone call to our daughter in NJ to break the news. Then the difficult phone calls to family and friends. Where do you start? I remember sitting on a bench near the boardwalk and paging through the yellow pages for an attorney. How do you just pick someone out of a phone book? We knew no one in Ocean City. Too many phone calls to remember. Too many decisions to make.

By 10 a.m. The story was on the internet, noon, the news.

I was in a vacuum with time dragging on. We passed the 77<sup>th</sup> street intersection several times – I had to look in the other direction, for fear that I would see something remaining from the accident. We contacted the police station hourly for an update. No news. At 4:00 we decided to search for rooms for the night and other family members began their trip to OC. We realized that we might not get to see him that day.

I tried to relax and turned the TV on in my room. The 5 PM news out of Philadelphia, Channel 6; Ben's picture on the TV screen and the story. It did not seem real. This could not be happening.

A Bail Bondsman called me around 11:00 pm. He had retrieved my cell phone number from my home phone message. He said he would meet us at the police station and arrange Ben's bail. Ben was arraigned at 11:30 pm. I watched as they brought him out in chains around his legs and handcuffs behind his back. He wouldn't look at me. He wouldn't let me hug him. He said "Mom—I don't deserve a hug, please don't".

We sat and listened as the charges were read:

DUI \$1,000/ 1 year

Homicide by vehicle \$1,000/ 5 years

Failure to stop at the scene \$1,000/ 1 year

Failure to remain at the scene \$1,000/ 1 year

\$50,000 BAIL - We posted \$5,000 -- 10%

Back at the hotel room --- what do you say? I wanted to hug him and tell him everything would be fine --- what every mother does. “Kiss them and make it better” I also wanted to scream at him, grab him and shake him. I don’t believe I said anything. I was too mentally and physically exhausted.

Thursday Morning. The headlines in the Reading Eagle with Ben’s picture:

“Graduate killed on 77<sup>th</sup> Street”

“Wilson grad drives drunk, kills pedestrian”

We had breakfast together. I remember it was all small talk: everyone just trying to get through the moment. I just wanted to get home. I had to go to the police station and retrieve some items from the car; items that belonged to Ben’s friends. I wanted the police officer to get them for me. But he told me I could sign for the car and get it out of impound. What was I going to do with the car? I didn’t want to see it, let alone take it. The gentleman at the police impound told me to take my time. I believe he understood my pain. He called a tow truck and gave me the phone number of the collision place where they would take the car. I walked to the car, trying hard not to look at the windshield and the damage. I tried to keep focused and gather the items. It was hard to catch my breath through the tears. I never saw the car after that day, but I will always “see it”.

We met with two attorneys later that afternoon and then headed home to PA. I couldn't shut my mind off -- too much to process and too many decisions to make. Our first decision was to get Ben in patient at Reading Hospital; his mental state was not good. He was admitted to Reading Hospital for 10 days.

Friday June 17<sup>th</sup>. Newspaper Headlines:

“Spring Township man posts bail in traffic death of Lehigh resident”

The financial burden can be astronomical, -- attorney, investigators, accident reconstruction, you can get through that, **but** the worst burden is the emotional. It's going on four years and I can vividly recall every minute, every second. Every day had so much pain. Our family will never be the same. I am not the same person. Everything is different.

Every day was a struggle for Ben ---- from the day of the accident until sentencing.

Depression and RX

Counseling

Addiction counseling, inpatient and outpatient

House arrest for 7 months; I watched as the bracelet was placed on his ankle in July 2005.

I don't remember much about the next 7 months. I just tried to get through each day. Every night I would say, I made it through.

In the trial by jury, if he was convicted he would serve 5 plus years in the Maryland State Penitentiary. Ben took a plea agreement.

The Plea agreement / sentencing occurred on February 6, 2006 –  
2 years – 1) DUI and 2) Homicide by vehicle  
3 years probation

\$9,000 restitution paid to Justin's family for funeral expenses  
40 hrs a year for three years public speaking with Justin's  
mother

That day in the courtroom was the most difficult day of my life. I remember the attorneys speaking and Ben's statement to the Sheftel's; to see Justin's parents for the very first time and to see the pain in their faces. To hear the statement read by Justin's father. It was too painful for me. I relive this every day. This is my cross to bear.

After the hearing we followed the attorney to the jail. I tried to hold back my tears as I saw him for the first time behind glass. It then became a reality that I wouldn't be touching him or holding him for quite some time.

I visited Ben every other weekend at the Worcester County Jail in Snow Hill MD for 5 months. I called the jail on a Tuesday and scheduled my visit. I would drive the 4 ½ hours early Saturday morning, see him in the afternoon, stay overnight and see him Sunday morning. Imagine not seeing your parents every day or your parents not being able to hug you or kiss you. Your parents would wait every evening to get a phone call just to hear your voice. Your mom would make sure she was home every evening so she wouldn't miss a call. Your parents would worry if you were hungry, safe, and warm. But I had Ben, Linda did not have Justin.

One of Ben's letters to me:

"I hate how everything turned out in my life so far. The bad seems to overcome the good in my eyes right now. I'm sorry this letter isn't a positive one. I just can't help but feel like shit sometimes, especially when I get to see you and talk to you behind a glass wall. Don't get me wrong, I love it when you come but it's just hard. I can't imagine what is like for you. To see your little boy in

the one place you least expect him to be. I want to say I'm sorry Mom, I really am. Just know that I will be a better man than I was and I will make you proud of me."

But the WORST struggle Ben will deal with the rest of his life is taking a life by drinking and driving. Making a wrong decision and getting behind the wheel of the car with a blood alcohol level of .16. Twice the legal definition of intoxicated; the decision that has changed his life and our lives forever.

I CAN'T imagine what my son sees everyday when he closes his eyes. I CAN'T imagine what it is like to lose a son; what the Sheftels have to face every day. I try and put myself on the other side. It is so painful for me. My soul aches. I have my son. Linda doesn't have hers.

Another of Ben's letters to me....

"No one understands what it is like to see the person for the first and last time. I mean having a kid smash through the windshield and the sound is enough to make your heart stop or skip a beat."

"Tell you the truth, Mom, I don't know how I'm going to live like this. My head is still messed up. I'm up for the challenge though, or the 5 million mile high mountain covered in razor sharp glass.

I read his letters often; to find some kind of comfort that I have done everything to be a good mother. I believe that every mother asks herself this question at one time or another.

TWO young men – their lives changed. Their family's lives changed. One life ended, one life struggling to make a difference. Justin, Ben.

**The past 3 years have been a personal struggle for me and a struggle watching my son deal with his negative self worth. Ben's set back in January of this year was another hurdle but a clear message to all of us that June 15<sup>th</sup> 2005 was a "Life Changing Event". It will never go away --- It is what it is. It is how we choose to deal with our struggles on a day to day basis. I also believe that all things happen for a reason --- we don't always understand what the reason is and sometimes we never figure it out. But I believe that I have become stronger on this road.**

**A letter from Ben 2/15/08 while he served time in Berks County Prison.**

**"I still feel horrible on the inside. I think you and Linda should carry out the message for me. I might be able to join you later. I really don't know how the people are going to react to me drinking and driving again. They won't understand why. I wanted to die that night --- when I was pulled over. I couldn't take the insanity in my mind anymore. I am not the person everyone thought I was. I am just a screw up. I am trying really hard to keep my spirits up, but it is hard. What do you and everyone see in me Mom, because I am lost?"**

**The first year of our speaking tour, we spoke to thousands of students, parents and teachers at 40 plus engagements. Last year, Linda and I continued with the message and spoke at approximately 20 plus engagements. We both thought it would get easier, but it didn't. It's difficult to hear each others pain and struggles and to relive the accident. You know at what point in the speech where each of us struggle.**

**I tell you this because we are here to make a difference --- we do not want any other mother, father, daughter, son, to suffer the pain that we have endured.**

**I truly believe that there is a reason for Ben to be with us --- he has a very strong message to help us deliver. He is a very caring and loving person. He made a life changing mistake.**

**Every decision that you make in your life has an outcome positive or negative. You can choose to get behind that wheel intoxicated, but I can guarantee that eventually you will suffer the negative consequences. I only hope and pray that it is not the consequence that Ben has had to deal with. It is your choice. Underage drinking is illegal and will have a negative outcome on your life. Drinking and driving are a lethal mixture, illegal and will have a negative outcome on your life. Please for the sake of the memory of Justin and Ben and their families and friends---- do not get behind the wheel or be a passenger in a car of someone who has been drinking. Give up your keys or take theirs.**

**One last note; it is not the right of passage to be apart of the last hurrah ---- Senior Week in OC, MD. Your right of passage was being brought into this world by your parents. I truly understand that each senior wants to go to the beach and have fun with their friends before starting their new life adventures. What is your definition of fun? You don't need alcohol or drugs to have fun. I am asking that you give up your week at OC and spend the week volunteering for a worthy cause or organization. Volunteer for your cause in the name of Justin.**

