

Son's death offers painful lessons

I have recently experienced a parent's worst nightmare. I got a call at 3 a.m. April 30, telling me that my 25-year-old son, Jesse Mason, had been killed in an auto accident.

Jesse was an incredible young man who was blossoming into a fine father, fiancé and salesman, but he was reckless, as many youth are. He felt invincible. He was incredibly strong and muscular, was a talented ultimate fighter and had won his first professional heavyweight bout.

Obviously, he was a tough and courageous kid. His arms, shoulders and neck were thick with muscle. Over the years, I begged him to wear seat belts but he refused. We fought about it many times, but he simply refused. As I agonize over it now, I think that in his mind it was somehow an admission of weakness. I think that he thought that it wasn't "cool" or "tough" to wear a seat belt.

Jesse was not driving the car the night he was killed. He was the front-seat passenger. None of the occupants in the car were wearing seat belts. The driver lost control, the car flipped multiple times, all of the windows blew out and Jesse was thrown from the vehicle. He broke his neck and died right away at the scene. Luckily, the other two were not thrown from the vehicle, so they both "walked away."

Jesse might have been reckless, but I know that he didn't want to die. He had plans. He

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Guest
commentary



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was working on an MBA (and constantly asking me for help with his homework). He was setting up a new apartment, learning how to parent, working on his Brazilian Jiu Jitsu skills, etc.

Young adults are reckless. It's part of growing up. We parents see it every day. It pains us to watch. Our beloved kids don't value life and safety (including their own) as much until they mature a little more. We want them to experience life, to take moderate risks, to be happy and fulfilled, but we want them to be safe.

If there are two simple things we can impress upon them to prolong their lives, they are to avoid smoking and to wear seat belts. From a health-care perspective, in both instances the evidence is irrefutable.

According to the National

Occupant Protection Use Survey, seat belt use in 2008 stood at 83 percent, a gain from 82 percent use in 2007. The survey is conducted annually by the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration. The 2008 survey also found that seat belt use for occupants on expressways increased to 90 percent (up from 89 percent in 2007), a statistically significant increase.

Also discovered is that seat belt use continued to be higher in states in which vehicle occupants can be pulled over solely for not using seat belts ("primary law" states) than those with weaker enforcement laws ("secondary law" states). Currently, Wisconsin is a secondary law state, and allows law enforcement to ticket a driver for not belting up only after the person has already been stopped for some other violation.

Also and most importantly, seat belt use has risen steadily since the survey began collecting data in 1994, and this has been accompanied by a 65 percent decline in passenger vehicle occupant fatalities per mile traveled.

Why did Jesse have to die? Why was he in the 10 percent still not wearing seat belts? Why is Wisconsin not a "primary law" state? Why do automobile engines even start without seat belts deployed? If you're a parent, ponder these questions carefully, and hug your kids every day.

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