Aging Lifestyles: Drinking and driving, disaster and death

by Joe_Volz

It's been 50 years now. But every time another teen like Tyler Murray of Ijamsville, Md., dies in a senseless crash, I remember my high school classmate Jerry Dunham.

Like Tyler, who was killed on a Maryland highway last March, Jerry, a teenage passenger in a car, had been drinking. It was just that fate gave Jerry a different hand on that rainy night in 1957 on a Pennsylvania highway. Jerry lived, but the driver died. In the most recent case, Tyler died but the driver survived.

But who is to say that Jerry was lucky to survive? He was paralyzed from the waist down and never walked again. His dream of playing the cello died that night and so did his hope of becoming a surgeon.

Jerry went on to graduate from Lafayette College and got an advanced degree in microbiology at Rutgers. But the lab corridors were too narrow for his wheelchair, so he lost one job after another working in a hospital. Jerry and his wife, Nancy, moved to a small cottage in the woods outside of Manchester, Vt.

He was active in civic affairs but never held a meaningful job again. Jerry was in and out of the hospital for decades battling the aftermath of that crash. Eventually he moved to Florida and gradually gave up hope. I got the call 20 years ago that he had died - starved himself to death.

What would Jerry have said if he had been around to attend Tyler's funeral? Probably, not much. Jerry was soft-spoken, not a fire-and-brimstone kind of guy. He would have rolled his wheelchair down the aisle and looked mournfully out at the young audience. Would he have urged them not to drink? Probably not. Teens are immortal. They are never going to die. They have life under control, don't they? Jerry's luck just ran out. Theirs won't. Isn't that the way they feel?

I miss Jerry. We all drank in college. It was the thing to do. You weren't a with-it kid if you didn't go out with the gang and drink yourself into oblivion. Full speed ahead. Damn the consequences. I suppose where we failed most was to pass on the word to our kids and grandkids about what happened to Jerry and our other friends.

Maybe we should have taken pictures. Who knows?

I wonder what Tyler's friends at Urbana High School are going to do to make sure they don't go to another funeral? We live in a culture flowing with booze.

And what are all the parents going to do? Let's hope that they don't do anything to send the word that drinking is all right. Let's hope that no parents give alcohol to their kids in a "controlled" setting, for example. Alcohol knows no controls. None at all. Jerry would tell you that and so might Tyler. But who's listening?

Maybe the people in Brevard County, Fla., have the right idea. Thousands of high school seniors went through "Operation Now" the other day. They looked at a re-enactment of an auto accident, including extracting a body from a car. Florida Today quoted Sgt. Rene Rugiella, whose daughter had died in a crash, "We cannot do anything more to get your attention, to get you to understand that you are not invincible."

How true. Jerry was deprived the joys of kids and grandchildren and sentenced to a life of pain because of one night a half-century ago.

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