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Death still haunts them Drunken driving fatalities leave void for the living

By Danielle M. Horn TELEGRAM & GAZETTE STAFF

Bruce Lamothe and David A. Wright Jr. don't want to sound preachy when they advocate for safe driving habits. But, they have no qualms about pleading. They don't want anyone to go through what they've experienced.

There has been a void in Mr. Lamothe's life since November 1979, when a drunken driving crash claimed the life of his brother, Mark.

And in January 1994, at the age of 25, Mr. Wright was behind the wheel of a car that crashed, killing his friend. Now, he lives with a brain injury and the painful reality that his decision to drive intoxicated changed so many people's lives.

"I don't want to put anyone at risk ever again," Mr. Wright said. "I learned what can happen."

Every president since 1981 has proclaimed December National Drunk and Drugged Driving Prevention Month. According to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, about 30 percent of Americans will be involved in an alcohol-related crash in their lifetime.

"There certainly are, at this time of year, more opportunities for people to consume alcohol at parties," said David Procopio, spokesman for the Massachusetts State Police. "That, combined with an increased volume of drivers on the highways, can lead to more crashes."

As public safety agencies push to prevent crashes and spread awareness about the dangers of drunken driving, Mr. Lamothe and Mr. Wright hope their stories will make people think twice about driving recklessly.

"Look at your wife, your child, your husband, your friend," Mr. Lamothe said. "Is it worth taking a chance to lose everything?"

David A. Wright Jr., driver in fatal car crash

Not a day has gone by that David A. Wright Jr. has been able to forget the night he cannot remember.

He knows only what he's been told: While driving home with his roommate from a night bar-hopping, he crashed into a telephone pole in Spencer. His friend, Derek J. Gaudette, 24, died. Mr. Wright, legally drunk at the time of the crash, fell into a coma, and would not regain full consciousness until three months later.

His first memory after that night was waking up at Fairlawn Rehabilitation Hospital. He relearned how to walk, talk and eat. He learned how to start a new life with a brain injury, significant nerve damage, and the weight of his friend's death on his conscience. Convicted of motor vehicle homicide, he lost his license for 10 years.

"My accident is with me every day until I go to bed," Mr. Wright, 41, said at his Worcester loft, which he bought last year after more than a decade of relying on family and public housing. "It will be with me every day for the rest of my life."

Nearly 16 years after the crash, Mr. Wright has finally become self-sufficient. Years of physical, occupational and speech therapy have been replaced by his own exercise regimen and constant efforts to overcome the disability that his brain injury creates. Short-term memory can be a challenge, so he writes himself notes. His speech is mostly clear, but at times, labored. He is self-conscious about his barely noticeable tendency to stutter.

Since 2004, he has worked full time for the University of Massachusetts Medical School reviewing disability claims. He volunteers several hours a week at UMass Memorial Medical Center, and speaks a few times a month for the Brain Injury Association of Massachusetts' Think a Head, Brains at Risk, and Gateway programs. Community service was part of his probation, but he fulfilled those requirements within a year of his case's disposition.

"I just love life now," he said. "I love being here, and I'll work as hard as I have to."

He says he'll always continue spreading the word about the dangers of drunken driving, because he doesn't want anyone else to go through what he did. After his crash, lives changed. His friend's family would never again see their loved one. His own family lost a piece of him, and made sacrifices to support his rehabilitation.

"I beg people to take care of themselves. Don't put people at risk. You'll pay for it for the rest of your life."

Mr. Wright doesn't want back the reckless life he was living before the crash, but he'd give anything for Mr. Gaudette to be alive again.

"I have no memory of the accident, and I don't want that memory," he said. "All I know is that I chose to drive that car, and I shouldn't have."

Bruce Lamothe, brother of man killed in drunken-driving crash

Time has done little to heal the wound that tore into Bruce Lamothe's heart 30 Novembers ago.

Certainly, Mr. Lamothe has come a long way from 1979, when he was an 18-year-old kid, recently graduated from Northbridge High and eagerly anticipating life after high school.

At his Sutton home, there are signs everywhere of a life well-lived and a family that is well-loved. A decorated Christmas tree shines in a living room full of family pictures. Sleds sit in the yard, waiting for their owners to come home from school.

He has a wife and two children.

But he'll never again have a brother.

"This 30th anniversary has just hit me," he said, remembering the night his 20-year-old brother, Mark, was killed. "As I watch my kids play together, it reminds me of my brother. Other kids' uncles will come to their nieces and nephews' (sports) games, and that's something my brother will never be able to do. There are so many reminders."

Mark Lamothe was a passenger in his friend's car when it crashed a couple days after Thanksgiving in 1979. The driver and another passenger survived. Police went to the family's Northbridge home and told them to call the hospital.

"The term the doctor used was 'expired,'" Mr. Lamothe said, fighting back tears. "I had just graduated, and we were making plans to travel. All of a sudden, all the plans were gone."

Mr. Lamothe pays closer attention to the news now. Fatal crashes, particularly those that involve alcohol, aren't just statistics to him. He wishes he could shake sense into people who tolerate reckless driving, people who think "it won't happen to me."

Mr. Lamothe wrote a letter to the editor last month, asking readers to enjoy the holidays responsibly and to remember that poor decisions may affect families for the rest of their lives.

"This is not just something that goes away," Mr. Lamothe said. "After the headlines are gone, there's still a mother, father, brother, sister ... who's not walking through that front door again, ever."

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