

Mother puts grief to work educating teen drivers

By Jonathan Stankiewicz

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COVENTRY — After Sherry Chapman's teenage son, Ryan Ramirez, was killed in a car accident eight years ago, she had to look for reasons to get up each day.

"For the longest time I couldn't eat, couldn't sleep," Chapman says. She tried to stay strong for her family, her daughter and grandson, whom Chapman loves dearly.

"I did not always succeed," Chapman says, "but they are the reason I forced myself out of bed each day and put one foot in front of the other."

Now Chapman has found a new lifeline: Keeping other teenagers from sharing her son's fate.

A year after her son's death, Chapman formed Mourning Parents ACT Inc., or !MPACT, with other parents who have lost children. Before her son's death, Chapman didn't know anyone who had lost a child, but she's since come to know many, she said.

"That's a party that most people would avoid like the plague, but these were the only people who really understood what I was going through," she says.

!MPACT, a nonprofit organization whose mission is "to eliminate tragedies caused by inexperienced drivers through awareness, education, and legislation," was a way to "carry (Ryan) into the future." Members of the group visit high schools and talk about the effect of such accidents on their lives.

"We talk about our children in these presentations," Chapman says, "and pour out our love for all to hear. We can't do that normally."

With pictures and memorial videos, Chapman can show her son to every audience.

"So many people know Ryan now," Chapman says.

Driver lost control

Ramirez, 19, was one of two passengers in a car driven by David J. Montroy, 18, of Coventry. Police said the vehicle was traveling north on Route 85 around 3:15 a.m. Dec. 7, 2002, just north of North Pond Road, when Montroy lost control of the car.

Montroy's vehicle struck two unoccupied cars parked near 448 Church St., before coming to a rest on a lawn.

The three friends were headed to Ramirez's house to drop him off after a night at another friend's house.

Chapman is convinced that the presentations !MPACT puts on are making a difference in changing risky behavior among teens. The mothers who speak hear it from the testimonials they receive, she says.

Chapman says the speakers "don't preach, we share."

Their presentations, which couple a real personal punch with their pleas, put the matter into perspective, Chapman says.

In addition to the presentations, Chapman worked for Connecticut's graduated driver licensing law, which was adopted in 2008. It has a three-tier system of restrictions to help beginner drivers get used to the road.

And now, with the aid of Sen. Christopher J. Dodd, D-Conn., Chapman hopes to see graduated licensing instituted nationwide.

'What you leave is your choice'

With her work with Ryan's fund, the Ryan A. Ramirez Memorial Fund Inc., with !MPACT, and her state and federal advocacy Chapman is quite busy. She makes time for her favorite hobbies, reading and gardening.

"I guess what I love most about gardening is the nurturing aspect of it," Chapman says — that and "making order out of chaos."

She's also passionate about genealogy, she says, calling herself the family historian.

After Ryan's death, it took three years for Chapman to get back into working on her family history. Her family members "gently prodded me," she says.

Chapman doesn't see herself burning out, though.

"My role with these organizations and activities may change over time, but I cannot see my passion for them dissipating," Chapman says.

Her philosophy of life focuses on the mark she'll leave on the world.

"Be cognizant of the footprint you will leave in this world," Chapman says. "What you will leave behind, big or small, good or bad, is all of your choosing."

Asked about her biggest pet peeve, Chapman says: "It is difficult to listen to people complain about mundane things." She has "no patience for anyone, who complains about their children," Chapman says.

For the immediate future, Chapman is finishing her memoir with the working title, "Unfathomable Loss: A Mother's Grief Journey."

The memoir, which was written in "real time" after the accident, is almost complete. Chapman is still editing and adding her perspective "from this distance."

To learn more about !MPACT, visit:

www.mourningparentsact.org/

Note that all presentations are free of charge and are done on a volunteer basis.

Get to know Ryan A. Ramirez at:

www.ryansfund.com/