

Lessons learned from a tragedy

By MICHAEL STRAND Salina Journal | Wednesday, April 02, 2014 2:00 AM



GYP SUM -- A drunken driver plowed into his car, killing Paige, the high school sweetheart he'd been married to for just six months.

He spent two weeks in a coma and months in a hospital as the burns that covered half of his body slowly healed.

Finally, Jared Estes was well enough to visit his wife's grave.

He'd had plenty of time to think about what he'd do when he got there, Estes told students Tuesday afternoon at Southeast of Saline High School; he planned to kneel over her grave, pick up clumps of dirt and finally let loose of all of the tears he'd

been holding in.

But he found he couldn't kneel, splints on his hands prevented him from picking up dirt, and recent surgeries to repair his eyelids meant he couldn't cry, either.

In his frustration, he said, one thought came to him: "Whatever doesn't kill you makes you wish you were dead."

A new goal

Minutes later, Paige's mother arrived at the cemetery in his hometown of Bucklin, with her two youngest children.

And when Estes saw them, he said, "I realized I'd want them to come back from something like this, and I thought, 'What if it were Paige who was here, had survived and was giving up?'"

"When I left the cemetery that day, I realized I had a new goal."

He's now committed to living life to the fullest.

"I'm thankful I'm still here," Estes said. "For a long time, I was trying to be the Jared that I had been, but that didn't work. I'm now the best version of the person I am now, rather than what's left of the person I was."

A chance meeting

Estes said he and Paige first got together when he was a senior and a candidate for homecoming king and she was a junior cheerleader who was supposed to announce the result of the homecoming election.

She made a mistake and announced that one of Estes' friends had won the vote. A few minutes later she discovered her error, he said, and he heard she was in the girls' locker room sobbing.

"I thought it would be funny, instead of making her feel better, to make her feel worse," Estes said.

After the game he walked up to her with gritted teeth and told her, "Meet me outside the locker room."

They went for a drive, he said, and talked about all the things that were more important than homecoming.

After they both graduated from Wichita State University -- she earned her degree in three years, so they could graduate together -- they were living in the Wichita area.

The DUI crash

They and two friends were leaving a Wichita Thunder hockey game when their car was hit from behind by a Porsche that was traveling about 150 mph.

Estes later learned that the driver of the other car was drunk and the crash resulted in his third DUI conviction; he was sentenced to 23 years in prison.

Seeing the damage

Estes went to court when he could and said he was always angry at the man.

But after his realization at Paige's grave, he said, he was at the driver's sentencing hearing, and "his family, who were there to say things that might help him get less time, they struggled to find something good to say about him."

The man's 19-year-old son said his first thought after hearing about the wreck was, "He finally did it. He finally killed someone," Estes said.

"What had he put his family through that that's the first thing your son says?" Estes said. "I zoomed out and saw the whole scope of the damage this guy had caused, not just to me."

Getting a chuckle

Estes alternated the sad and gruesome parts of his experience with light-hearted moments.

For example, he explained that his right ear had been burned off in the fire following the crash, and he'd been fitted with a prosthetic replacement.

Popping it off and showing it to the crowd -- to a few surprised gasps -- he said he would like to one day wander into a store in a mall and ask about getting a piercing and then put his ear on the counter.

And when he was showing a series of about a dozen photos of himself in the hospital, with all of the skin on his head burned off, the final photo was of him with Bruno Mars -- which drew a chuckle of relief from the students.

After his talk, Estes said he had only recently added the hospital photos to his presentation. He found it "too depressing" when giving his talk to a university audience, so he added the Mars photo.

A lot to hear

Several students in the school's FCCLA club had heard Estes speak before, and they invited him to the school.

"We thought he was a really good speaker and wanted more students here to hear him," said sophomore Hannah Henry.

"You definitely hear more the second time you hear him," said sophomore Sarah Starr. "I think I got more out of it this time."

"It's not all sad," said sophomore Valentina Ortega. "He has a way of doing it that makes you feel hopeful."

-- Reporter Mike Strand can be reached at 822-1418 or by email at mstrand@salina.com.

- See more at: <http://www.salina.com/news/SES-talk#sthash.Jy0vfYVw.Be98cfyE.dpuf>