

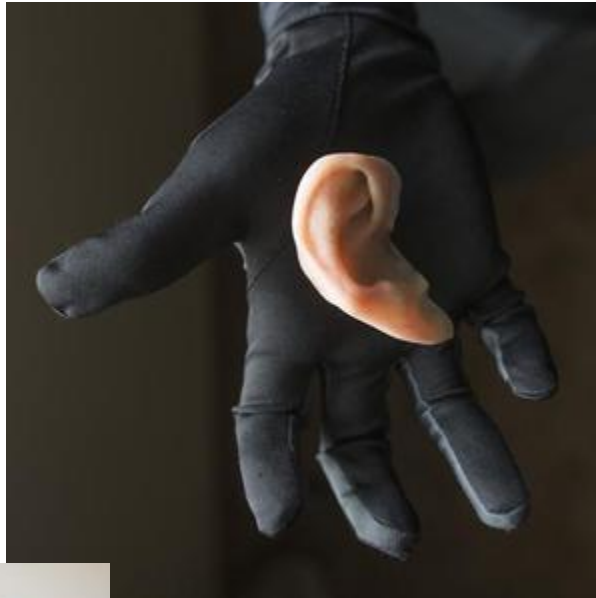
# Man burned in 2005 crash that killed wife to pursue career telling his story to help others

- By Annie Calovich
- The Wichita Eagle
- Published Saturday, Jan. 11, 2014, at 3:29 p.m.



Travis Heying/ The Wichita Eagle

Jared Estes holds a picture of himself taken about three weeks after he was severely burned and his wife was killed in a car crash in 2005 caused by a drunken driver. Estes recently left his job at Hartman Arena to devote his career to speaking about the aftermath.



Travis Heying/ The Wichita Eagle

One of Jared Estes' ears is prosthetic – he's able to remove it – and one of his hands is gloved to protect its delicate skin, grafted from his leg after he was severely burned in a car crash in 2005 caused by a drunken driver.



Travis Heying/ The Wichita Eagle

Jared Estes leafs through materials he's accumulated from years of speaking about the aftermath of a drunken-driving crash that killed his wife and severely injured him.

When bad things happen in life, from the smallest slight to the greatest tragedy, that's not the time to turn inward, stay angry or give up, Jared Estes says.

Instead, each setback is an opportunity to enter more deeply into the gift of life, by opening outward, seeing the good that is there, being thankful for it, and then giving of yourself, says Estes, who has experienced pain of the most tragic sort.

Estes doesn't use his suffering – the death of his young wife in a crash caused by a drunken driver in 2005 and his own grueling recovery from extensive burns from the same crash – to one-up people on the pain bar. Instead, through talks he gives at schools and military bases – and in one-on-one counseling with the despairing and

severely injured – he shows how other people, giving of themselves in the ordinary course of their day, helped him recover so he could do the same.

Now, almost nine years after the accident, Estes, 34, has left his job as marketing director of Hartman Arena to make a living giving his talks.

Some friends, meaning to support him, say they're glad he's following his dream. But reliving the greatest horror of his life in the course of giving his talks isn't his dream, he says.

He just knows it's what he's supposed to do.

## **On the tour bus**

Estes remembers the first time he was able to get through telling his story without breaking down.

It was soon after he had returned to work as marketing assistant for the Kansas Coliseum, late in 2005. Default, a band whose music was helping him through his recovery, was performing at the Coliseum.

Estes asked the band's manager to have the members autograph a CD sleeve for him, and found himself invited onto their bus, being asked to tell them what had happened to him.

*I know that life ain't always good to you.*

*I've seen exactly what it's put you through*

*Thrown you around and turned you upside down and so you*

*You got to thinking there was no way out*

*You started sinking and it pulled you down*

The lead singer had a bite of food on his fork, and the bite never made it to his mouth as the band kept urging Estes to tell them more. It was all off the cuff, the way Estes tells his story to this day:

About how he was a senior at Bucklin High School and was selected basketball homecoming king, but the girl announcing the winner read the wrong name. When Estes found out about the error – only after he was off the court – he didn't think it necessary to have it corrected. He did, however, begin pursuing the girl who made the mistake, the woman who would become his wife.

About how they had been married six months when they were on their way home from a hockey game at the Coliseum in March 2005, two of their friends in the back seat, when a drunken driver going at least 120 mph slammed into the back of their car on West Kellogg. About how everyone made it out of the burning car except Paige, who was 23 years old.

About how Estes was so severely burned that he was in a coma for two weeks. And when he awoke his dad told him that Paige had died. And Estes wanted to die. Not only was his wife gone, but his face was so erased by the burns, his identity went with it.

About how, as he endured layers of mental anguish on the one hand, the physical rehabilitation was excruciating on the other.

Half of his body was burned, and the other half had to be peeled to repair the damaged area. When he was lifted up to try to walk for the first time, he felt the healing skin rip off his back, leaving his bed dripping with blood. And he didn't end up walking that day; he just crumpled.

About how it took three months before Estes was well enough to visit Paige's grave back in their hometown of Bucklin, two hours west of Wichita. And once there he wanted to rant and really grieve alone for the first time.

But he could only barely move, the pain raged, and one of his eyes was sewn shut, so he couldn't even really cry. He was beyond exhausted. At that point he'd had it. He was done.

And about how one in a string of right-people-at-the-right-time occurrences happened: His mother-in-law and Paige's young siblings pulled up in their car right then, and when Estes saw the children approach him – traces of Paige in their faces – he realized that if it had been Paige who had lived, he would have wanted her to be fully alive, for herself and for them.

And he had an epiphany.

*It may be tough you've got to get back up*

*Because you know that life ain't over yet*

*I'm here for you so don't forget*

*You can count on me*

*Cause I will carry you till you*

*Carry on*

When Estes was finished telling his story to the members of Default – whose song “Count On Me” reminded Estes of the people he had been leaning on for his recovery and whom he didn’t want to disappoint – he realized something: His story had helped the band.

And it helped him to tell it.

## **Soldiers and students**

People in the military today, as those in civilian life, seem to have fewer coping skills than their forebears, says Col. Charles Carlton, commander of the 22nd Medical Group at McConnell Air Force Base. So many kids come from broken families, and when they’re growing up and playing sports, they’re told everyone’s a winner.

But in real life, not everyone is.

On top of that, the electronic age sets people up to expect quick solutions, Carlton says. So when people feel themselves pushed to the edge, they may be tempted to take the easy way out by taking their own lives, he says.

They don’t take into account that there are people willing to help. So Carlton brings in speakers such as Estes to teach his airmen about resiliency.

Popular and likable, funny and thoughtful, Estes has a knack for making everybody feel like they’re his best friend, said Christen Skaer, a Wichita veterinarian who was friends with Jared and Paige before they were married.

Estes calls everybody “buddy” with a lack of self-consciousness that desires not just to help others but to learn from them, in a reciprocity that recognizes the dignity of the other person.

“He’s never been the shy one,” said his younger sister, Sarah, who is public affairs manager at Beechcraft. She and Estes rent a house together in Andover.

“He’s outgoing and relatable to a lot of people. Once you meet Jared you’re automatically drawn to him. He’s always had that kind of personality, before the accident and after the accident.

“I think it’s our family in general. My dad’s got a great sense of humor. He’s a business guy and salesman; it runs in the Estes family.”

Jared Estes is not only funny, comically skewering the language to create nicknames and confessing a fondness for SpongeBob SquarePants; his humor is of a gallows nature particularly suited to talking about some of the gruesomeness he’s experienced.

A Facebook post from Christmas Eve 2012 shows a photo of him with his young nephew holding lighted candles before them at a church service. The caption: “Not too close to my face there Nafey. Unkin Jared has had about enough of that in his life. (smiley face).”

Estes also jokes that a prosthetic ear that had to be made for the right side of his head is cool because he can take it off and pop it into his niece’s juice.

“Even when he’s talking about the most horrible things, he does it with a smile,” Skaer said. “He makes people laugh through the whole thing, and I think that’s an amazing thing to do. He makes people feel better.”

Estes gave his talk for the first time officially in 2007, when the Sedgwick County Sheriff’s Department brought in hundreds of high school students for a cautionary program about drinking and driving. The word then started to spread about Estes as a speaker; his connection to the military started with an airman who was working out next to him at Genesis and noticed his injuries.

Estes always starts his talk with film footage that introduces the audience to Paige so that they have an image of her. But the talk has evolved over time, from being mainly about her to being a thank-you to his helpers to being

about “what happened to me and how I got through that and how we get through that, because we all have tragedy and loss in our lives,” Estes says.

He never writes his talks down; he thinks that would compromise his sincerity, and that would “kill me.” Instead, he tries to relive his experiences fresh each time – bearing the vulnerability of a high school student, the wounds of a warrior, the fragility of the sorrowful.

Paula Bette, Maize High School counselor, has Estes come to the school every other year to speak to the juniors and seniors before prom, to help them with their decision-making, including showing them the consequences of drinking or texting while driving.

“He has such a wonderful message, and he does it in such a non-lecturing manner where he just really captures the students’ attention,” Bette said. “It’s so quiet when he’s in there talking. ... He just really has that talent of getting through to them.”

## **Overcoming anger**

Estes draws parallels not only between himself and those who are hurting, but between himself and those who hurt others, including the driver of the car that caused the 2005 crash.

Louis Kebert from Mulvane, now 52, pleaded guilty to second-degree murder and five counts of aggravated battery in the accident and was sentenced to 23 years in prison.

As part of his talk, Estes says that it crushed him to see how broken up Kebert’s family, including Kebert’s then-19-year-old son, were about what had happened. Instead of falling into resentment toward Kebert, Estes says he made strides in his healing by realizing that he himself had started down the same path of making selfish decisions when he was at Paige’s grave for the first time and had given up.

“Acting like it’s my life and everybody can just deal with it makes no sense,” Estes says in one version of his talk. “Nothing is ever just about me, and when I made it all about me for a short while, it was the most hollow and dark feeling in the world.”

Similarly, Estes said that he found himself sad the second Christmas after the accident, until he noticed the happiness of his family around him opening their presents. Once he focused on that, it was as if a switch were flipped, and he opened up to what was there rather than focusing on what he didn’t have.

He also had to let go of the what-ifs that paralyzed him for a long time.

“When he gives his speeches it’s amazing to see the response he gets from the soldiers, people who went through a similar experience, the amount of people who come up afterward and say thank you, or ‘what you said hit home,’ or ‘your message was delivered well,’ ” said Chris Bowman, prevention coordinator for the Army substance abuse program at Fort Riley.

Estes has been such a hit at McConnell that he’s one of the base’s honorary commanders.

“I don’t pretend to know what those guys go through on a day-to-day basis,” Estes said of those in the military, “but when it comes to the struggles we have in life, we’re all in the same boat.

“There have been times when I spoke to the wounded warriors ... and those guys ended up helping me more than I could ever help them. When you get to speak to your heroes, it’s pretty surreal, for sure.”

## **‘I don’t have it that bad’**

Estes’ face and eyes still bear traces of his injuries; he wears a black glove and sleeve on his right hand and arm to protect sensitive grafted skin, and often a hat on his head to cover scars.

He can’t straighten the fingers on his right hand, and he sometimes experiences stabbing pain in addition to the arthritis-like pain that’s always in the background. He has to work out at least four times a week to keep his body from tightening up.

But it’s not from a sense of vanity that the outward signs bother him, if they do at all; it’s from a fear of being pitied. He thinks that holds a person down.

“We’ll always have an excuse to feel bad or down,” Estes says, but the ability to be in a tough spot and still care for other people “is the best thing you can do for yourself and others.”

Estes knows that not everyone in a tough spot has the support he's had: the people in his life before the accident – his close-knit family of parents, a brother and two sisters, as well as his friends – and those who were added afterward, including burn-unit nurses who found themselves during their off-hours thinking up ways to make him more comfortable.

On the other hand, most people have not gone through the level of horror he's been through. A common thing that people say to him after his talks: "I realize now that I don't have it that bad."

But comparisons don't enter into Estes' message. He realizes that the gifts of support he has had along the way were received only through his tremendous suffering.

"The good that can come out of it on the other side is immeasurable," he says.

People who haven't experienced his depth of suffering, mental or physical, still should sound the depths of what they have to offer, he says, because that's how he made it – everyone around him being what they could be, along with a beyond-human hand evidently at work as well.

Estes has a strong faith, he says, but hasn't been very religious, though he has been going to church more lately with the woman he's been dating for a year.

## **A new path**

Over the past few years, the number of places asking Estes to give talks has increased to where he couldn't do them and his job at Hartman Arena at the same time.

So he quit Hartman toward the end of last year and is now putting together materials to market himself for the first time, including to companies such as Coors and Budweiser, which have their own speaking bureaus. He has a "public figure" page on Facebook.

Estes never asked for money for his talks in the past, but organizers usually at least made a donation to the Paige Estes Memorial Foundation, set up to raise money for causes such as the Via Christi Regional Burn Center, the Children's Miracle Network and the DUI Victims Center.

Now Estes will be requiring a fee, while still allowing for limitations in budgets such as those of schools.

Sarah Estes has attended some of her brother's talks – especially at the beginning when he first started – to support him.

"It's really neat to see him get up there and speak," she said. "Even when we're in restaurants, kids and military people recognize him and come up and thank him, and it's really cool to see the impact he's had on people's lives.

"I think there's a small window where he can do the speaking full time and still be able to relate to his audience. I think when he's in his 50s, wearing skater shoes and talking about how cool SpongeBob is, he might lose their attention."

---

Reach Annie Calovich at 316-268-6596 or [acalovich@wichitaeagle.com](mailto:acalovich@wichitaeagle.com). Follow her on Twitter: [@annicalovich](https://twitter.com/annicalovich).

Read more here: <http://www.kansas.com/2014/01/11/3222670/man-burned-in-2005-crash-that.html#storylink=cpy>