

An Open Letter to Mercer Island Parents: Don't let your child kill someone or be killed by another child.

March 30, 2006

Last night nearly one thousand people gathered at the temple to grieve the death and celebrate the life of Robert Jonathan Vasen. Robert was a wonderful, cheerful, incredibly insightful, loving, wise beyond his years, giving, warm, fun loving, humorous, and selfless 20 year old young man. He was a friend to our family, especially to our son, Tony. He died on Monday, but as his brother David, wracked with sorrow and grief, said to the assembled family and friends, he was killed. He was killed, his life was taken away, by another who had been drinking and sped through a stop light and extinguished the life of a young person who had dramatically affected so many lives in his short time, and who had nothing but unlimited potential to give more if his life had continued. Many, including myself, have sought ways to make sense of this tragedy, but it is not possible. We have thought of all the things that Robert was and have shied away from the how's and why's of how it happened. Robert was not ill. He was not old. And, he was not in the wrong place at the wrong time. He was just living life and doing one of his favorite things – enjoying his friends.

David admonished all of us, older and young, to recognize this for what it truly was – a horrific and preventable tragedy. Then he begged us to not sit quietly in our grief. He beseeched us not to let time pass and wounds heal. He implored us to do something. He demanded that we not let drinking and driving happen. He challenged us to lock away the keys if we are drinking. He asked us to have the courage to not let those whom we are with have the keys if alcohol is present. He pleaded with us to stand up for life. He implored us to be accountable and responsible.

Then he proceeded to talk in the most loving way about his wonderful brother.

The Mercer Island community has had its share of “Roberts”. Each time there are the same reactions of grief and anger and then, seemingly, life moves on, except for those who have lost.

No more. Our daughter is 16. She drives and she goes to our high school. We know that alcohol and drugs are present and available to our young ones. I now hear about crack cocaine being used by our sophomores! This is impossible, but not. This is incredible, but not.

We talk to our daughter about alcohol and drugs. We are very clear that they are not ok. We talk about drinking and driving. We are very clear that she needs to call for help if she is ever in such a situation. We always check on evening events. We always talk with parents who are chaperoning, even though some are offended. We know that alcohol is present or available to almost every event. And we know the potential horrific consequences for our daughter.

We will use our last breath to make sure that she is not killed by some drunk. And we will do everything we know how to be sure that she does not find herself in the position of having killed someone because of alcohol.

I would ask every parent and member of this community to stand up and fight for the lives of our children. Don't keep quiet and worry about what your friends or neighbors will think. Don't say to yourself later that you wished that you had spoken up. Don't bend or be deterred by your child who might find your questions and concerns embarrassing. My goodness, be adults and stand up!

The last thing I wanted to be doing last night was standing up to remember Robert. I could hardly look into the eyes of our friends Dany and Evie, Robert's parents or those of sister, Jackie and brother, David. It was hard to see the grief in our son and our daughter. And it was hard to screen out the inevitable thought of it being one of them and not Robert.

All of us love our children. We love ours – Luke, Tony and Nell. We will not stand idly by and let this happen to them or any of our “children” on this island.

Stand up now or stand up later and don't forget that we are parents who do not want to go to funerals of young ones, especially our own.

Thank you.

Mike Rona