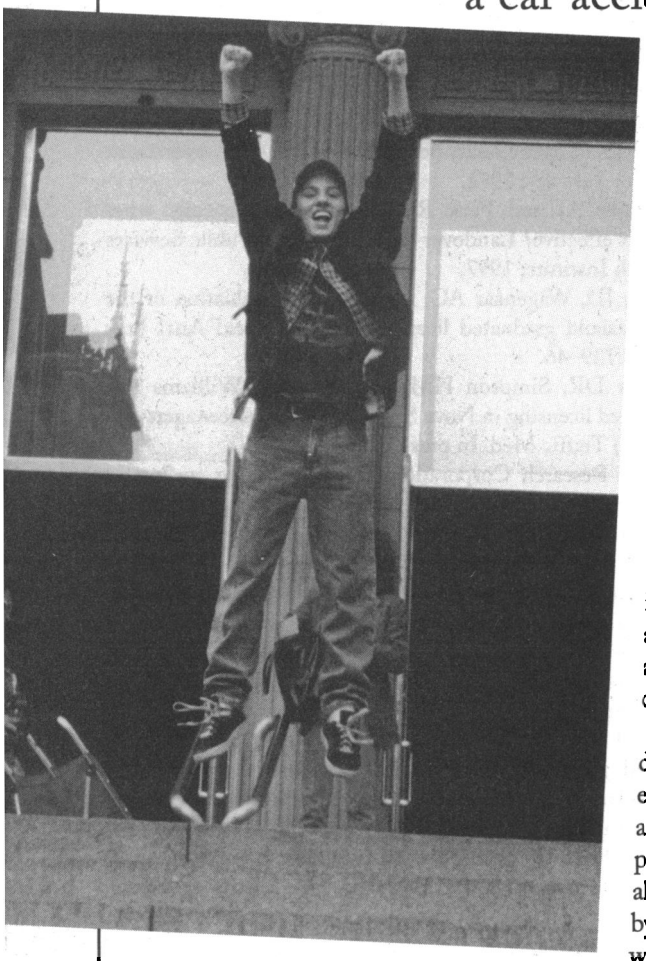
Charles J. Puccia

One Fatal Night

"Good-bye, Dad. See ya later."

Those were my son Gabe's last words to me at 8 p.m. on Friday, October 13, 1995. He died in a car accident slightly more than an hour later. Gabe was a passenger in a car with four of his friends. Two others died in that crash and two survived: three dead and two emotionally scarred for life despite essentially recoverable physical wounds.



When a car hits a very large tree while traveling at a speed estimated between 55 and 75 miles per hour, it is remarkable that anyone could survive. I lament that my son was not among the living. Regretfully, I now find myself able to personalize the statistics laid out in the rationale for adopting provisional licensing systems described in the article by Allan Williams (page 452).

How could the crash have happened? Was the driver intoxicated? Using drugs? Reckless? Inexperienced? In Massachusetts an autopsy is required on all motor vehicle deaths. The test results showed no alcohol or drugs in any of the boys' bodies and corresponds with the account of the two surviving boys. The survivors also claim that the driver was not reckless but admit to a fast speed.

Fast speed was certainly a factor, just how fast cannot be accurately determined. By definition a newly licensed teenager is an inexperienced driver, but Gabe's friend had six months of experience and had attended both a high school driver education program and an independent driving school paid for by his parents. He had been driving all summer. Not a lot of experience, true, but enough to justify trust by his parents, his friends, and their parents to permit him to drive with passengers.

My son's death fit almost all the statistics that confirm the teen crash problem. The driver was 17, the car was speeding, and there were more than three occupants—all teenagers. The accident occurred at 9:05 p.m., just within the typical statistical time frame of between 9 p.m. and 6 a.m. Yet, statistics can't be applied to individuals: statistically, an American male has an expected life span of 76, but when a man dies at the age of 45, the statistics prove meaningless for his family—and they are cruel reminders of potential when applied toward a dead boy of 16. The tragedy of the

death of a child is the life not lived, the things unseen, the promise unfulfilled, and the love that will not be.

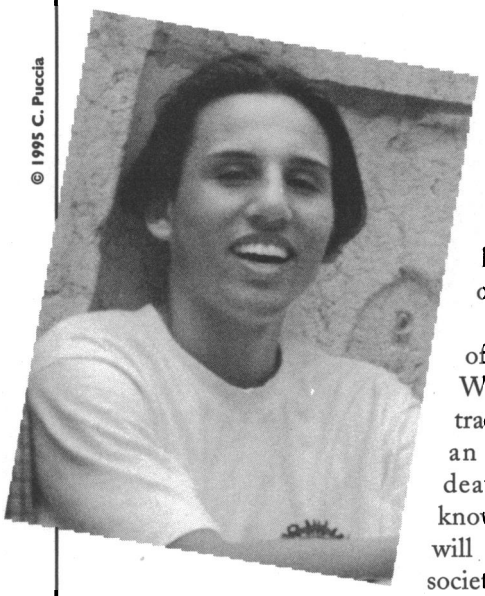
The summer of 1995 was filled with his potential. Gabe spent 10 weeks in Italy, first living independently while attending an Italian language school and then traveling with us, his family. In September, Gabe was back in high school as a sophomore. With a promise that he could return the next summer to Italy, he showed a new interest in studying. His table manners improved immensely, and conversation advanced from one-word replies and grunts to full sentences expressing ideas. We saw him begin to take pride in himself, losing shyness and gaining self-confidence. In short, we saw our boy entering adulthood, and it felt very good.

As implausible as it may sound, Gabriel had an innate ability to become a friend to anyone. From the time he entered day care until his last days in high school, everyone liked him and he liked everyone—literally. At his wake, every teacher he ever had, from day care through high school, came to pay respects. His physicians from over the years came, and in one case a doctor who had to be out of town sent his daughter to represent him. Hundreds of friends came, sent letters, and left mementos and flowers at the tree. We received letters from classmates who had moved away, from Italian teenagers he had met during the summer, and from other European students who had met him at school in Italy. This was my son Gabriel.

Perhaps every tragedy begets questions. In the case of a car accident, the question most likely to arise—no matter what the circumstance—is, why did it happen? Most of the time, the fact of the accident is hard to grasp. Most of the time, the accident seems to have been avoidable. At least it seemed so for me. Since Gabe's accident I have returned many times to the scene. Over the first six months, I stood at the tree on average twice a month. I've measured the road. I've even tried to speed at 60 miles per hour, but I couldn't recreate the crash. The road has a curve, yet the tangent to the curve where centrifugal force would push a car off is too far ahead of the tree: it seems that the car should have hit a stone wall or several small trees first.

Driving tests need to be a challenge, not a ride around a quiet neighborhood or in a parking lot with cones.

We know the boys did not drink that night or use drugs. The road was dry. It was a clear night, and there was no other traffic except an approaching car. Ironically, the driver of the approaching car was a neighbor to one of the boys. He used his cellphone to call the emergency vehicles that arrived within several minutes of the accident, so delay in emergency treatment does not explain why they died. Two? Three? A couple? of the



boys wore seatbelts; the others did not. Gabe was not saved by his seatbelt; his friend in the back seat might have been had he worn one.

For a parent, the death of a child is inexplicable. While it may appear contradictory, all parents want an explanation for the death of their child yet know that no explanation will suffice. For the rest of society, statistics help explain the causes of such tragedies.

What kind of teenagers die in car accidents? Are they different from others? Do they seem likely to have accidents? I don't know about the generalities, but I do know my son. He was similar to many boys and to his friends that died with him, yet he was different. I'm sure this is true for all the thousands of teenagers who make up the death statistics.

Physical and mental characteristics of the teenagers in accidents remain uncollected statistics and probably always will. How many had learning disabilities? How many showed emotional stress? How many with indulgent parents? How many driving an unfamiliar automobile? What number were distraught over test scores at school? How many had just been in arguments with their parents? Had a disagreement taken place between the driver and passengers? The questions are endless, but for a grieving parent the questions are always endless.

Some details become meaningless or irrelevant. Did the driver use his or her brakes before impact? Yes or no, the car still hit the tree. Was the driver playing with the radio dials? Perhaps. Was the air pressure in the tires at the correct value? Probably not, since most people don't check their tire pressure very often. Did the car have mechanical problems? Every car has some kind of mechanical problem, but whether it was sufficient to cause an accident is the real question. Even with faulty mechanical problems, rarely are full post-crash studies conducted because they are too expensive.

Some helpful details could be collected at the accident site but are not. If entire airplanes can be reconstructed at untold cost and human resource when 260 passengers die, why can't the National Safety and Transportation Board develop statistics on teenage accidents when thousands of teenagers die each year in automobile accidents?

We can use statistics for making policy, law, and regulations, which may not console grieving parents but will reduce the number of them. Despite widely held beliefs, accidents involving teenagers are not generally caused by drinking and driving. In 1996, 21% of 15- to 20-year-old drivers in fatal car accidents were intoxicated, according to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration. Among young men in this age group, alcohol-related fatalities account for 25%, while for young women, the number is 12%. The vast majority of all teenage accidents cannot be blamed on a recently consumed substance. However, the statistics are clear on one point: inexperience and immaturity contribute to the cause of accidents.

After Gabe's accident, thoughts about the driving laws immediately came to mind. With my youngest son soon entering the teenage years, the idea of his getting into a car with other teenagers becomes nightmarish. An initial, unreflective response is to think of working to raise the legal driving age; it was my first reaction and the one most often mentioned by friends. Yet even a small amount of reflection refutes the logic of changing the law—it would be politically too difficult. And I have heard many parents talking about their eager anticipation of their daughter or son getting a driving license as quickly as possible. I understand what a teenage driver can offer to two working parents with complicated schedules: freedom from the burden of chauffeuring, an extra helping hand to run errands, the ability of the teenagers to get themselves to part-time jobs.

If the potential cost were fully understood, many of these parents would not be so eager. But the potential cost becomes calculable only when the teenager has had an accident. Think of the potential of uncleared sidewalk ice to cause a pedestrian injury. It doesn't take much imagination to see this potential. But it does take a strong imagination for a parent to think the unthinkable, that their teenage son or daughter might be killed in a car accident. Averages rarely convince people, while a personal experience does, and then it is too late.

The notion of a driving test needs upgrading. An inability to parallel park will not kill anyone; not being able to control a car or react with due attention will. Driving tests need to be a challenge, not a ride around a

quiet neighborhood or in a parking lot with cones. The test should demand quick reaction and probably should be administered at least twice with different testers.

What matters to me is that I loved Gabriel and now he is gone forever. Distressed by my failure to protect him, I have become preoccupied with driving safety for my youngest son. Long before reading the Williams article, I thought of a graduated licensing system, although I didn't give it this name and didn't realize I was reinventing the wheel. Graduated licensing makes sense to me in the only case I know firsthand, not a statistic but an actual event. In my opinion, graduated licensing would almost certainly have saved my son Gabriel.

Support this important public health measure. Save my younger child. Save your child. Save somebody's child.

Mr. Puccia, in addition to supporting changes in driver licensing, organizes the Gabriel Puccia International Soccer Tournament for teenagers between 15 and 17 years old, in which teams from the Northeast United States, England, Italy, Germany, and Canada have participated. All proceeds go to a charitable trust to support local high schools students in pursuit of academic studies.

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Suggested reading: Finkbeiner AK, *After the Death of a Child: Living with Loss through the Years* (Free Press; 1996).