



Family's New Charge

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Staci Matlock | Photos by Luis Sánchez Saturno
December 24, 2006

This year, the Christmas Eve dinner table at the Collins home in Las Vegas, N.M., will have five fewer place settings.



Five names are absent from the gifts under the Christmas tree.

The five holes in the family's hearts -- impossible to fill.

In ways small and large, Ray and Cathy Collins, their son Ray Collins Jr. and their granddaughter Arissa Garcia are reminded every day of the empty spaces left behind after a drunken driver killed five members of their family Nov. 11. The holidays are especially hard. This is a time when the family traditionally wrapped gifts together, cooked tamales and empanadas together and ate together.

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"We take things one day at a time. We start out OK in the morning," said Ray Collins Sr. "Then we find something that reminds us. My wife recently found a box of candy one of the girls gave her the day before the accident."

Collins' daughter, Renee Collins-Gonzales, son-in-law Paul Gonzales, and granddaughters Alisha Garcia, 17, Jacquelynn Gonzales, 11, and Selena Gonzales, 10, died when Tesuque resident Dana Pabst hit their minivan while driving the wrong way on Interstate 25 near Santa Fe. Pabst, a repeat DWI offender, had a blood-alcohol level three times the legal limit. Collins' granddaughter, Arissa Garcia, 15, and Garcia's pet Chihuahua were the only survivors of the crash.

The tragedy has heightened the Collins family's awareness of drunken drivers. They said their mission now is to change the way people perceive alcohol.

Ray Collins Sr. and Ray Collins Jr. rattle off DWI statistics they didn't know before the accident that decimated their family.

"There are four times more deaths from alcohol than all other drugs

combined," said Collins Sr. "But there is 25 times more money from the federal government for fighting other drugs than controlling DWI."

They've learned from state police that intoxicated drivers going the wrong way on New Mexico's highways is nothing new. It's been in the news more lately after the crash that killed their family.

The circumstances leading to the crash that killed their family has made the Collinses change their own responses to people who drink and drive. Pabst apparently was intoxicated on a flight to Albuquerque and was allowed to leave the airport, and police said he bought more beer somewhere on his way to Santa Fe before the accident.

Collins Sr.'s brother, Albuquerque attorney Gerald Collins, sat next to an obviously inebriated man on a recent trip to Dallas. The passenger passed out, Gerald Collins said. Prior to his family's tragedy, he would have ignored it. But when the plane arrived in Texas, Collins told airport authorities, and the man was detained. "I am now much more aware of my surroundings and who is consuming alcohol as a result of the tragedy," he said via e-mail.

The family met with Gov. Bill Richardson and agency directors, hoping to change the way DWI and alcohol are treated in the state. Richardson has already announced he is committing more funding for DWI officers, checkpoints and patrols. He also announced a "Drunkbusters" unit will be hired to respond to DWI calls in Bernalillo and DWI court monitors will be added in six counties.

The family thinks some of his proposals are good but says law enforcement is only part of the solution.

The family gave Richardson a list of 13 recommendations. The members haven't heard yet whether he will support any of them. "I do not know if the governor is going to run for president, but if he does, I hope he makes alcohol (abuse) one of his campaign issues," Collins Sr. said. "It's not just driving the wrong way on a highway drunk. There's a lot of domestic violence because of alcohol. Too many lives have been hurt and destroyed by alcohol."

Arissa Garcia, who is once again attending West Las Vegas High School but still faces surgery for a torn knee ligament due to the accident, said little during a recent interview. She left most of the talking to her uncle and grandfather.

Most of the family's recommendations to the governor center on making alcohol less available and increasing DWI prevention education programs.

The family members want equal television time for ads selling alcohol and ones showing the aftermath of DWI accidents. "Beer commercials are not aimed at adults. Adults already know what kind of beer they like," Collins Sr. said. "Look at when they air those commercials. The ads are aimed at younger people, their future market."

"Unlike the tobacco industry, which is restricted in its advertising, the liquor industry has carte blanche to advertise at will," Gerald Collins wrote in the family's letter to the governor. "I have never heard of anyone being killed by

a driver who was under the influence of a cigarette."

They want to see more restrictions on where alcohol can be sold. They think alcohol sales should be prohibited in convenience stores and drug stores. In a 3/4-mile stretch of 7th Avenue in Las Vegas, they counted 10 businesses that sold liquor and beer. "I think where you can put gas in your car, you shouldn't be able to buy alcoholic beverages," said Collins Sr. "The same thing goes for drug stores. Right now, people can go pick up their prescription drugs and a six-pack of beer in the same place."

Collins Sr. said he also wishes trained grief counselors were available for his family and his granddaughters' classmates. "With an incident like this, you need help, counseling. Family and friends try to help, but they're suffering, too."

Their church and Catholic faith have helped sustain them for brief periods. "You find inner peace in church," Collins Sr. said. "Then you leave there, and a few hours later the tears come back."

Ray Collins Jr. said he misses his daily talks with his sister, Renee, who was "best man" at his wedding three years ago. He'll miss going to midnight Mass with her this Christmas. "All we can say to people spending Christmas with their family is, 'hold them close, kiss them,' " he said. "There's people like us who won't have that luxury."

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RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE GOVERNOR FROM THE COLLINS FAMILY

- Limit the number of television commercials that the alcohol industry can air in a 24-hour period.
- Specify the times that alcohol commercials can be aired.
- Require alcohol commercials to have more age-appropriate content.
- Require the alcohol industry to pay for the airing of educational advertisements provided by MADD and other organizations to provide balance.
- Prohibit the sale of alcohol at all convenience stores and gas stations.
- At event sales, limit servings of beer to 12 ounces and other drinks to 6 ounces; limit number of servings to a patron at one time to one drink.
- Don't allow patrons to buy alcoholic drinks from their seats.
- Disallow alcohol advertising on billboards.
- Do not allow posters advertising alcohol at convenience stores, grocery stores and sporting events except directly in front of the cooler or section where alcohol is being stocked for sale.
- Require airline and airport personnel to be more proactive in spotting intoxicated travelers and passengers, denying the service of alcohol to impaired travelers and passengers, and detaining impaired passengers and travelers so their mode of land transportation is determined and safe transport can be achieved.
- Provide more education to children about the dangers of alcohol use.
- Require auto-manufacturers to install alcohol-detection devices in cars that would disable the vehicle should the driver be under the influence. Incentives could be offered to the manufacturers to make

this happen.

Comments

By Stop DWI, Inc. Midland, TX Program Administrator (Submitted: 12/27/2006 5:02 pm)

The dangers of drinking and driving are experienced every where. Our hearts are one with the Collins family. This is a wonderful article, and I have shared it with many in West Texas.

We at Stop DWI, Inc. share in this loss and the loneliness and pain experienced is our too. We have some victim families here in West Texas, like the Collins family, who have made Alcohol Awareness their life's issue.

Cordially,

Charles Hodges

Program Administrator, Stop DWI, Inc.

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By LA Perez (Submitted: 12/27/2006 7:17 am)

Arissa and family - you will all be in my thoughts and prayers this holiday season. Please, please never give up the fight against DWI's and the Alcohol Industry regarding restrictions. Maybe you can make the difference in this ever increasing problem. It will never bring your mother, father and sisters back to you, but it may help in the process of healing your broken heart, and save others from the same pain.

God's blessings to you.

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