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## Robert's Story

*Robert's Story was written in September 2000, a few weeks after he died. It was first published in The West News, a local newspaper. Later it was placed on Robert's first web page.*

### How Many Sacrifices?

By Jack Church

Labor Day will forever hold an entirely different significance for myself and my family, for it was this past Labor Day that my 20-year-old son, Robert Church, was found dead in his pickup truck. It was spotted by a Sheriff's Department helicopter, upside down in a pool of water in a deep culvert, about 20 feet beneath the gravel road that he was traveling on. The area is obscured by sugar canes and trees. If the helicopter pilot had not found him he might still be in that pool of water.

My son's death was the result of some poor decisions that he made. I am writing his story now, in hope that it will prevent others from making the same mistakes that he did.

Robert was just three months away from his 21st birthday. I believe that like most people of his age, he felt that he was invincible. Many of us shared that attitude when we were growing up. Why else would he take the chances that he did, and make the decisions that ultimately ended his life, if he did not possess that belief?

There were a number of events that lead to this tragic conclusion. Alcohol was definitely a contributing factor, if not the ultimate factor.

#### Robert's Final Weekend

Robert's final journey began on Friday, September 1, 2000 when he attended the opening night of the Westfest Festival in West, Texas, the town where we moved when he was 5 years old. (Westfest is an annual festival that celebrates the heritage of those who are of Czechoslovakian decent.) I saw him at the festival at around 9:00 p.m. He appeared to be fine, with no apparent signs that he had been drinking.

As we traced back the hours prior to my son's death we learned that he came home around 2:30 a.m. Saturday, September 2nd. We would later learn that my 16-year-old stepdaughter was awakened by his arrival. I asked her if he appeared to be intoxicated. She made the comment that he "fell up the stairs" as he was heading to his bedroom.

We also learned that he called a friend shortly after he got home that Saturday morning. He told her that he wanted to see her, but acknowledged that he was unable to drive, and asked her to come pick him up. She did indeed pick him up and they went back to her house. She told us that Robert went to sleep about 4:00 a.m. She woke him up shortly after 7:00 a.m. and drove him back to our house. His plans included helping decorate one of the many floats that would be in the Westfest Parade, which would begin at 10:00 a.m. that morning.

My stepdaughter awoke early Saturday morning and said she saw Robert between 7:30-8:00 a.m. She said that he was dressed, on the telephone, and drinking a beer. She assumed he had been at our house since she saw him come in earlier that morning.

When my wife and I awoke shortly after 8:00 a.m. that morning she followed me into downtown West, where we parked my pickup along the parade route so we would have a place to sit. Robert had already left. We returned home to eat and Robert passed us heading into West, pulling a trailer of mine loaded with picnic tables and hay bales. Apparently he was letting someone



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else use it for a parade float.

My wife and I, along with her 6-year-old son, Zachary, drove back to West to watch the parade. The last time I saw Robert was when he was on one of the floats. He saw us as the float he was on passed by us. He yelled "Zac!" as he tossed a large handful of candy to Zachary.

#### **Where's Robert?**

We went home after the parade and went to Westfest that afternoon. My stepdaughter was one of the many Sokol gymnasts that would be performing that afternoon. I had been asked to emcee the performance. Either before or after the gymnastic performance, (I can't recall which), my former wife, Robert's mother, saw me and came up to say that she was worried about Robert. She had been leaving messages on his pager and cellular telephone. He had not returned her calls. Although this concerned me, I also knew that he often ignored pages from both of us. I told her that he was probably with friends, ignoring the calls, and that we would see him later that evening at the festival. We never did.

I saw several of Robert's friends that afternoon at the festival and I asked if they had seen him. They said they had not seen him since the parade. The last person he was known to be with was a friend that went with Robert as he drove to Bellmead, (a city just north of Waco), that Saturday afternoon around 1:30 p.m. They went to a dry cleaners where Robert picked up some of his clothes. He dropped his friend off and that was the last known person he was with.

By now I was beginning to feel a sick, emptiness in my stomach, with countless scenarios of where he might be racing through my mind. The festival draws upwards of 15,000-20,000 visitors daily. I kept thinking he was there somewhere; that we would see him before the night was over. We never did.

### **A Sleepless Night**

We went home that night and my worry began to turn to fear. Where was he? Why hadn't he called? Usually he would call us if he was spending the night with someone, but there were times in the past when he had not. When he would show up the next day we would always ask him where he had been, and told him to please call us when he wasn't coming home so we would not worry about him. He would always say, "I know I should have called. I'm sorry. I'll call next time."

I knew that Robert drank beer. He was convicted of a DWI violation in April of 1999 and received a one year probated sentence. I made him pay his monthly probation fees and payments to his attorney. I told him I wanted him to think about it every time he wrote a check for those fees. I thought he had learned from that experience. Obviously he did not.

I can honestly say that I never bought or gave him beer, but I knew that he was still drinking from time to time. As a parent I wrestled with what to do. How do you "ground" a kid that is almost 21 years of age? I knew if I tried to do that he would simply move out. He had earlier lived with roommates in an apartment while attending junior college. That was a time of anguish, as there would be several days at a time where I would not see or hear from him. I was relieved when he moved back home because I would be able to more closely monitor his activities. Still, you can't confine your kids to your home when they are that age. You have to let go, however hard it may be. I would remember all the wild things I did when I was that age, and the risks that I took in pursuit of "fun". As parents, we can only pray that God will watch over them and keep them safe from harm.

#### **Day Two**

After a night of little sleep, I awoke Sunday morning to find that Robert had not come home. Again, a thousand fears raced through my mind. My insides were wrenching with a feeling known only by those who have had a loved one missing. I had already called the local hospitals and jails. I knew the police would not accept a missing person's report until at least 24 hours had passed since he was last seen. We simply had to wait, and wonder.

Robert's mother called me early Sunday morning to see if he had come home. When I told her he had not, I said that we were headed back to the festival and would continue our search there. I saw one of his best friends there, and he told me that he was very worried. He knew that Robert would often ignore pages and voice mail messages from his mother and I, but never more than a couple of minutes passed before he would return a call to his close friends. All optimism left at that

point. We knew something was terribly wrong.

By then over 24 hours had passed since Robert was last seen. It was time to file a missing person's report. I drove to the automobile dealership where I worked. I had sold Robert his truck only a couple of months earlier. I retrieved the sales file to get his license plate number and called the Sheriff's office to file the report. The dispatcher said a Deputy would call us to get the information. I gave them our cell phone number and we went back to the festival to continue our search.

While talking with the West Police Chief and another officer at Westfest, a Sheriff's Deputy called our cell phone. I gave him the information while we were talking to the West Police. Shortly after that we heard the missing person's report broadcast over the Chief's two-way radio. It was 8:08 p.m., a time I will never forget.

We continued our search at the festival, but Robert was nowhere to be found. We went home that Sunday night for another night of little sleep. By Monday morning Robert's mother and a group of his friends were at my home. We were calling everyone we could think of. Several of his friends were calling people on their cell phones. Robert's mother said she had spoken to the Sheriff's Department and they told her their helicopter would be searching the area as soon as it finished another mission.

#### Robert Is Found

Shortly before 12 noon someone said that the helicopter had set down in a field beside a gravel road about a mile from our home. EMS and Fire Department vehicles had been summoned. I jumped into a pickup with one of Robert's friends. Other's got into other vehicles as we all raced to the scene. I could see an ambulance parked sideways in the road, blocking non-emergency vehicles from getting down to the scene. I jumped out of the pickup and raced towards a cluster of DPS and emergency vehicles that were parked another hundred yards or so down the road. We were restrained by EMS personnel that recognized us. We were held at the ambulance for what seemed an eternity. We were told that a pickup had driven off the road and landed upside down in a small body of water below. Wrecker personnel were in the process of retrieving the vehicle to see if anyone was inside the cab, which was submerged in the water.

I remember crying, "No! No! It can't be him!"

They said the helicopter pilot was drawn to the site, after flying over it twice before, by a reflection from a chrome tip on one of the truck's two tailpipes. Robert had a new exhaust system with chrome tips installed on his truck only about a week earlier. At that moment I experienced a parent's worst fear. I knew it was him.

#### "He's Dead"

Finally four figures began walking toward the point where we were being contained, all looking down at the ground. I remember recognizing at least two of them as our family doctor, who works with the EMS, and our Justice of The Peace. I think the other two were Freddie Kaluza, a friend of mine with West EMS, and my boss. What I clearly remember is that when I saw David Pareya, the J.P., my heart felt as if it had just been kicked by a horse. I knew what we were about to be told. They broke the sad news to me, Robert's mother and his 18-year-old brother. They gathered us inside the ambulance. They said a prayer for Robert and our family. They asked if we had a funeral home preference.

We were escorted back to my house. Much of what happened after that is still a daze. We were told that Robert was being sent to Austin for an autopsy. He had been in the water for almost two days, with outside temperatures well over 100 degrees. He was badly decomposed. Our biggest fear was that he drowned while being conscious. Our family doctor and other EMS personnel assured us that they saw signs of a massive head injury. Based on their medical knowledge and experience, they said they felt certain Robert died on impact. He was not wearing a seat belt.

David Pareya told me that he should be receiving the preliminary autopsy results late that Wednesday. Family visitation was scheduled from 6:00-8:00 p.m. that evening at the funeral home. Shortly before 6:00 p.m. I was escorted into a small kitchen area at the funeral home so I could call the J.P. to see if any results were in. Robert's mother was brought into the room while I was on the telephone. When my conversation ended I told her what I had been told. The results from the blood tests were in.

The pathologist estimated Robert's blood alcohol level at the time of death to be between .19 and .26, two to three times the legal limit. I told her I felt that we could not hide these findings, trying to keep them a deep, dark family secret. His mourning friends and others needed to know what truly happened to Robert, so hopefully they would learn from this tragedy and not repeat it. His mother agreed.

We joined the other family members at the visitation at about 6:15 p.m. Nothing was said of the results at that time.

### **A Conversation Within**

A voice within me told me that I would speak at my son's funeral. I hesitate to use the word "voice" because then people think you are crazy. It was not a literal voice, although I will use that word for the description of what was happening. Whatever you want to call it, this "conversation going on inside me" would not go away, as hard as I tried to push the thought out of my mind. Speak at my son's funeral? The thought of my doing that was "crazy" as far as I was concerned.

The logical side of my brain was telling me, "No way. I'll never be able to hold my composure to do it." The relentless message I received was, "Yes, you will speak. You will never have the opportunity again to reach as many people in a more receptive frame of mind to what you will say, especially the younger ones. You can do it. This is not negotiable."

That night I gathered the family members and friends that were in our home into the kitchen area. I told them the autopsy results that I have been given. I also told them I would be speaking at Robert's funeral, and telling those kids there what happened. I told them that the only conclusion I could draw as to why Robert was taken from us like this was that God chose him as a sacrificial lamb, to serve as an example and reminder to us that our actions and decisions can be deadly if we make the wrong choices. If this story is not told, then in my mind, he died in vain.

There was a moment of silence as some looked at each other, or at me. Someone said, "Jack, there is no way you will be able to do that." I said that I had been told otherwise, and that I had no say in the matter.

Robert's grandmother, (my mother), was the most resistant. Like most grandmothers, she was in a protective mode. My mother said, "You don't know that the alcohol was the definite factor that caused Robert to end up where he did."

I replied, "That's correct. But we cannot deny that it did not at least impair his ability and reaction time as he apparently veered off the road."

### **The Funeral**

I can only remember bits and pieces of what I said at my son's funeral. I remember saying that funerals are supposed to be a celebration of life, and not a time of sadness. I said that I did not want to add sadness, but there was something that everyone present needed to know, as to why we were there. I remember saying that Robert had done nothing that myself and many others present had not done before, at some time in our lives. By the Grace of God, we luckily got home safely. In this case, He took Robert home. I remember telling the mourners that, as most of them already knew, Robert had a heart as big as the church sanctuary we were in. He was a good kid that simply made some bad decisions, and we all needed to learn from the tragic end of his young life. I said that it seems about once each year we have to bury a young person from our community. How many sacrifices does it take before people learn?

More autopsy results came back later in the week. The report stated that there were no signs of trauma to his body, either internal or external. This was totally contradictory to what our doctor and the EMS personnel told us. I spent hours questioning them after the autopsy results were released. I was then told that when Robert was first removed from the cab of the pickup once the water had escaped, his skin color from the neck area up was a mixture of purple and black; a clear sign of head trauma, caused by swelling of the brain. The remainder of his body was "white as a sheet". After his body was exposed to the sweltering outside temperatures the remainder of it actually began to turn purple. I was told this is common. By the time his body reached the Medical Examiner's Office in Austin he was one color. Because of this, and no signs of an actual skull fracture, the pathologist did not rule that Robert's death was caused by head trauma. The official ruling of the cause of death was "freshwater drowning". What our doctor and EMS personnel

perceived as a large gash on Robert's head was apparently part of the decomposed state that he was in.

Yes, there is no disputing the finding that drowning was the ultimate cause of death. However, based on the statements of the medical personnel on the scene at the time, along with the position of the body in the truck which indicated no signs of an attempt to escape the cab, the evidence strongly supports their belief that Robert was not conscious when he drowned. This is a small comfort to his surviving family, but a comfort nonetheless.

The final report of the autopsy was later released. It was the results from the toxicology tests. No traces of drugs of any kind were in his system.

### **Multiple Factors**

Everyone will draw his or her own conclusions as to what factor or factors led to the ultimate death of my son. Overwhelming evidence shows that he consumed a large amount of alcohol between Friday evening and the time of his death, estimated to be some time around 2:40 p.m. Saturday. His cell phone records indicate no activity after that time. His brother passed him on the main road leading into West at 2:30-2:35 p.m. on Saturday. Robert was coming from the opposite direction and obviously headed to our home with his dry cleaning to shower and dress, and perhaps take a nap.

We now know that Robert had very little sleep the night before. A friend of mine was talking on Tuesday to the father of one of the young men that was on the float with Robert in the parade. The young man told his father that "everyone was having a hard time keeping up with Robert at the rate he was drinking beer." Alcohol and fatigue are a deadly combination.

It is doubtful that Robert had anything to eat Saturday morning before he headed into town to help the float workers finish getting the float ready for the parade. At the rate that he was reported to have been drinking, it is highly possible that he was at least partly dehydrated due to drinking multiple beers on a sweltering hot day. The windows were rolled up on his truck and the air conditioning switch and fan switch were in the on position. It is possible he simply fell asleep while driving home, veered off the road and landed in the pool of water below the roadway. He could have passed out, blacked out, or simply taken his eyes off the road while changing cassette tapes in his audio system. We will never know.

I spoke to the Department of Public Safety Trooper that investigated the accident. Despite an earlier statement that high speed was believed to be involved, he told me that once the truck was removed from the water and seen to have had only minor body damage, as well as other evidence at the scene, he stated in his report that the truck appeared to have left the road at a moderate rate of speed. This further supports the theory that my son passed out, or simply fell asleep. The truck was in fifth gear. If he had been going the speed normally associated with a vehicle in this gear he would have cleared the water and hit the embankment on the other side, with the vehicle sustaining considerably more body damage.

What we do know is that he "pushed his body to the limit". Like many his age, he was known as a "party guy", and was definitely in a "party mode". Most of his friends refuse to accept his alcohol level as the cause, or at least a major contributing factor. Everyone who saw Robert that day said he appeared to be in control; that he could "hold his liquor". That is one of the most troubling parts of this ordeal. As individuals, we are the worst judges of our abilities if we have been drinking. The cemeteries are full of people who thought they were "just fine". I just thank God that, regardless of what caused the crash, it didn't occur on a busy roadway and cause the death of someone else as well.

Some of you will no doubt find this article uncomfortable to read; perhaps too graphic. I can assure you that it is not pleasant writing it. Sometimes, however, it requires something shocking or graphic to register with people and to make them think. That is why I have written what I have.

### **Talk To Your Kids**

In the coming weeks there will be at least two events that pose a potential danger to our young people. They are football homecoming games and prom dances. For a large number of people, drinking will be part of their celebrations, and many will drive after having consumed alcohol.

If your sons or daughters will be part of these activities and are still at home, I beg you to sit

down with them and read this to them, or have them read it to you. If they are away at college, or simply just "out on their own", mail this to them.

### **The "Other People"**

We read or hear about stories like Robert's almost daily. Most of us say to ourselves, "Oh, that poor person. That poor family." Then we go about our everyday life, believing that these life-changing events only happen to "other people." I know I used to. Now my family is part of those "other people."

I hope by your reading this that you, young or old, are impacted by my son's story. I hope you examine your lives, habits and attitudes. We are put in positions daily where we have to make decisions. Make the right ones, for the wrong ones can have a devastating effect.

Don't become a member of the "that happens to other people" club. Our family is now one of its newest members, and I can assure you that it is not a group that you want to be a part of.

Robert is the 5th student of his high school class of 1998 to die at a young age. I pray that he is the last.

### **"There Are Many More"**

While sitting in a vehicle after my son's graveside service, waiting for people to get into the other family car in front of us so we could leave the cemetery, we had the windows rolled up and the air conditioning on. A young man who appeared to be about 19 years old came up to my door. I rolled the window down and the young man leaned over and said, "Mr. Church, I only knew Robert for about nine months. We were in school together at T.S.T.C. He really was a great guy. But what I really wanted to tell you was that what you said today at his funeral I will never forget."

As tears flowed I looked up to him and said, "I hope so, Son. I hope so." As he walked away a calming spread through my body and a voice within me said, "See, there's one. But there are many more". If that young man reads this story, I hope he will contact me. I don't remember if I thanked him for what he said to me.

I now know I have been called to share Robert's story with as many young people as possible, including adults who have been convicted of DWI, in hope that they will learn from Robert's fatal decisions. I've been promised that however painful it may be at times, it will change some lives for the better. I can only say what I told that young man at the cemetery. I hope so. I hope so.

This site is best viewed with Netscape 6.0 or Microsoft Internet Explorer 5.5 and higher.

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