

“Drink If You Must... Just Don’t Drive”

By Dan Steber,
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On Friday night, Jan. 24, 1997, Bob Walsh was taking Kaye, his wife of five years, to dinner. They asked Kaye’s 32-year-old daughter, Robin [*a resident of the household for the past three years*], to join them, but she declined, saying she and her friend, Denise, had plans and would grab something to eat later. “I told her to be careful, that I loved her, and I would see her in the morning,” said Kaye.

At 3:45 a.m., however, Kaye awakened for no apparent reason. “I remember it like it was yesterday,” she said. “It was a Saturday morning, and it had rained.”

Kaye made a pot of coffee and looked out the living-room window to see if Robin’s car was parked in the driveway—it wasn’t. She then looked for her daughter’s car keys on the counter, but they weren’t there. “Robin always was good about letting us know if she didn’t plan to come home because she knew we would worry,” Kaye noted. “Because she hadn’t called, I began to worry.”

At 4:45 a.m., Kaye’s worst fears were realized when the doorbell rang. “I opened the door, and there stood a police officer and a police chaplain,” she explained. “I knew immediately that Robin was dead. The police officer asked me to get my husband up before he told me anything. In the darkness of our living room, he then said, ‘There has been an accident, and Robin didn’t make it. She was killed by a drunk driver.’”

That news sent shock waves through Kaye. “I was numb, I couldn’t think, and I felt like throwing up,” she said. “All I could do was shake; amazingly, I couldn’t cry.” Kaye kept thinking they had made a mistake, even after the police officer handed Robin’s purse and car keys to her. She then asked about Denise and learned she was in intensive care at the hospital. Robin also was at the hospital—in the

morgue. “I couldn’t comprehend the word ‘morgue’ in relationship to Robin,” Kaye said.

At this point, Kaye started questioning the police officer about her daughter’s offender. She was told his name, age and BAC, which still was 0.16 nearly two hours after the crash. She asked if it was his first offense. The officer explained it was his third. He went on to tell Kaye that the crash occurred at 1:35 a.m. and that there were two witnesses who said the offender earlier had been behind them for quite a spell. They were fearful he was going to hit them. Because they had a small child in the backseat, they kept a close eye on him, trying to stay out of his way. They only could watch helplessly as he ran a red light and hit Robin’s car.

There were no skid marks to indicate he tried to stop. The crash tore Robin’s car door off and sent her car sliding 150 feet sideways. Denise’s head knocked out all the glass in the passenger door. Meanwhile, the steering wheel was shoved to the middle of the dash. Both Robin and Denise had their seat belts buckled.

After the police officer and chaplain left, Kaye asked her husband to go to the hospital and make sure it was Robin. She handed Bob a flower that had been kept in the refrigerator. The flower was from a wedding reception Robin had attended the week before. Kaye told Bob to “put it in her hand, if it really is her.” He came home without the flower but had a white bag containing Robin’s clothes that had been cut off her at the scene. “He wouldn’t let me go through the bag,” said Kaye. “He instead put the bag in the garage and told me I needed to do that later.”

There’s a little irony in this story. One evening at dinner, a couple months before Robin’s death, she told Kaye and Bob she wanted to be a donor. “I said I didn’t want to hear any of that,” Kaye noted, “but I did tell her to have it designated on her driver’s



Navy photo by Fred Klinkenberger

Kaye Walsh tells an audience the story of how a drunk driver killed her daughter.

license. She didn't do it, and I didn't think about it again until Life Net called after Bob returned from the hospital. They asked if I would be willing to let Robin be a donor. Remembering the conversation I had had with her, I agreed."

Finally realizing that her beautiful Robin was dead, Kaye began to cry—actually, she wailed. As she described, "I couldn't believe the sound that came from my mouth. What happens is that you begin to have rapid flashbacks. I remembered the day she was born, then my mind jumped to high school, then back to her early childhood and her first day of school, her first date, the first time she drove a car, then something she said to me or something I said to her. I even thought about the first time she tied her shoes alone and the expression of pride on her face. It doesn't stop. Her whole life was flashing before my eyes, and it was yelling at me. Your body, nor your mind, rests—this went on for almost a year afterward.

"I still have times, even though it's more than eight years later, when my mind goes to those special places, especially when Robin's birthday approaches, or at Christmas, on Mother's Day, and the anniversary of her death. I miss her terribly. I've had to adjust to life without her, and that's one of the most traumatic ordeals that ever could happen to a parent. I never could have prepared for something like this."

Kaye and Bob made funeral arrangements in Illinois, so Robin could be buried alongside three

generations of her ancestors. When they walked into the funeral home for the wake, Kaye's wailing started anew, and she began to sob uncontrollably. "There was Robin, dressed in her classy suit, with her hands crossed and her eyes closed," said Kaye. "I kissed her hard, cold face; touched her hard, cold hand; and asked God to please carry me because I couldn't do this on my own."

A few days after returning from the funeral, Kaye and Bob went to visit Denise, who looked like "someone had set off a time bomb in her face." She had severe head injuries, a broken collarbone, a back injury, and still had glass stuck in her head and face. Because of her back injury, she couldn't walk. Denise told Kaye she felt very guilty, which prompted Kaye to ask why, but Denise couldn't give her a specific answer. Several months later, friends of Robin and Denise told Kaye the answer. They explained that Robin [*the designated driver that fateful night*] had



Navy photo by Fred Klinkenberger

Bob Walsh displays the clothes Robin Gustafson was wearing the night she died.

Here's what remained of Robin Gustafson's car (see inset for photo of victim).



wanted to leave a party a couple of hours earlier but that Denise wasn't ready to go. Robin stayed to make sure Denise got home OK—"that's the kind of person she was," acknowledged Kaye.

When the drunk driver that night came to trial, Kaye was sure he would get a slap on the wrist. That was the normal sentence at that time for DUI manslaughter convictions. However, the judge sentenced him to eight years in prison, which, as Kaye and Bob were told, was the stiffest sentence to date for a single DUI fatality. The judge suspended four of those years, an unwise decision, as later events proved. The drunk driver was released on unsupervised probation and, five months later, again was convicted of DUI—his fourth offense. Kaye didn't learn about this conviction, though, until nearly two years after the fact, while searching the state-court website city-by-city.

With the help of a Mothers Against Drunk Driving advocate, Kaye learned the drunk driver had been charged as a first-time offender—his record "magically" had disappeared from all law-enforcement databases. To make matters worse, his manslaughter conviction never had been sent to DMV after his 1997 conviction. Kaye brought this information to the attention of the commonwealth attorney's office, and the offender subsequently was convicted of violating probation in January 2003—another felony. He had to return to prison to serve the remaining four years of his original sentence and wasn't scheduled to be released again until April 2006.

As Kaye remarked, "I couldn't let my daughter's killer do it to another person. The system had a hole in it, and I couldn't stand by and let this person go free." She's not done with him yet, either. "I'm going to be his shadow," she assured.

While neither Kaye, nor Bob, ever can do anything to bring Robin back, they are doing something to help prevent others from ever having to endure the same kind of grief. They carry their riveting, life-changing story to monthly SARP (Substance Abuse and Rehabilitation Program) Norfolk meetings and to local commands' safety stand-downs. The couple's presentation starts with a drunk-driver's victim board in front of the audience, a MADD banner covering a table, and a bag sitting unattended on a seat. Kaye and Bob alternate at the microphone. At one point, Bob walks over to the bag, which contains the clothes that were cut off Robin that night. He removes the items one at a time, which usually brings gasps from the audience.

"We don't want anyone to go through the pain and suffering we did," Bob tells the audience. "A mishap doesn't affect only the offender or the victim; it affects the families and friends of everyone involved. This sorrow is easy to prevent: Drink if you must... just don't drive." ■

Visit the Naval Safety Center website at www.safetycenter.navy.mil for more information on traffic safety and impaired driving. And visit the Speaker's Bureau to contact people like Kaye and Bob who are willing to help your traffic and off-duty safety stand-downs.