

By Maria Smietana

RACHAEL'S First Week

No parent sends their child to college with the expectation that they'll never see them alive again. Zionsville resident Angi Fiege was one of those parents. As a Critical Care Physician, she was much more acquainted with death and serious injury than most parents. She had tried to make sure that she gave her daughter Rachael all the necessary tools to avoid the potential dangers of college life before she dropped her off at IU in August of 2013. Angi and Rachael were extremely close, and talked about everything with each other.

Rachael was a level-headed kid, a good student, and a soccer player who was well-liked on and off the playing field. There was no reason for Angi and her husband Rick to think that their only daughter would have anything but a successful college experience.

Just a few days after Angi had settled Rachael into her dorm room, Rachael attended an off-campus party, hosted by older students who were also graduates of Zionsville Community High School. She was among her own, and naturally, was excited to be attending her first college party. She texted her parents good night, telling them that she loved them. Angi reminded her daughter to stay with her group and to be careful.

Sometime during the night, Rachael fell down the steep basement steps of the house where the party was being held. Friends carried her back upstairs and laid her on a couch, assuming she would be fine by morning. No one suspected she had sustained a life-threatening brain injury. By the time she was found unrespon-

sive several hours later and emergency services were called, she had stopped breathing. Her distraught family arrived at a Bloomington hospital in time to kiss her goodbye and arrange for the donation of her organs.

Determined not to let Rachael's tragic death define how she would be remembered, Angi slowly turned her immense grief into a vision for the organization that would become known as "Rachael's First Week." The message to young people is clear: "You don't have to know the details of how to take care of someone who is injured or severely intoxicated - you just have to call for help immediately, before a life-ending event occurs."

In the five years since its founding, Rachael's First Week has grown into a

powerful force for saving lives. Most of the organization's outreach is done through presentations that are targeted at high school seniors and college freshman around Indiana. Julie Myers, the organization's Director of Marketing and Programs, explained that the program goes far beyond just alcohol education. "We start out talking about paying attention to anything you put in your body, whether that's drugs, alcohol, vaping devices, or even caffeine," she said. Early on, Myers was flabbergasted to learn that many teens now view cigarettes as totally nasty, but wrongly believe that vaping devices are totally harmless. Some brands, especially the kid-friendly "mod pod" types, may contain as much nicotine as an entire package of cigarettes! Another alarming trend is the co-consumption of alcohol with high-caffeine sodas or energy drinks. Believing they are "okay" or "not drunk" as long as they are wide awake, many partying teens fail to understand that their blood alcohol levels continue to rise to toxic or even deadly levels, even when caffeine masks the effects.

Everyone involved with Rachael's First Week hopes to change these sorts of misconceptions and behaviors, one student at a time.

Beyond substance abuse, the presentations, delivered by a devoted crew of volunteer medical students and Emergency Medicine residents, cover stress reduction, mental health awareness, sexual assault prevention, and exit strategies for safely getting out of uncomfortable situations. Medical students are ideal presenters, according to Myers, because they carry weight with their young audiences—they have the knowledge to clearly explain the consequences of risky behaviors, but are only a few years out of college themselves, so high school and college students find them both credible and relatable.

Program participants are also made aware of Indiana's "Lifeline Law", which provides certain types of immunity from prosecution to individuals who identify themselves to law enforcement while seeking medical assistance for someone suffering from an alcohol-related health emergency. Myers notes that lifeline laws are not universal, something that families sending their children to out-of-state colleges need to be aware of.

Aside from the presentations, which are currently available only in Indiana due to resource constraints,



Rachael's First Week uses social media to send safety reminders to college students during times when they are particularly vulnerable, such as during IU's Little 500, or Purdue's Grand Prix.

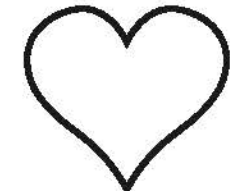
But regardless of how the message is communicated, the organization's overarching goal is to get young people to take care of themselves, and each other. Much of the advice is simple common sense, though it may not be obvious to the teenage brain: Let someone know where you are. If you pass out, are you with people who are going to care? In social situations, especially where alcohol is present, stay observant. Never leave someone alone at a party. Whether with friends or total strangers, look for signs of trouble. Beyond just staying with someone who may be intoxicated or injured, don't be afraid to step in and call for help. You might be that one person who makes a difference. "You'll never regret stepping in, but you will regret not doing something," Myers added.

In the five years since the Fiege family launched Rachael's First Week, about 10,000 students have been reached. Last year alone, 15 presentations were conducted. But Myers wishes many more students could be reached. To that end, the organization, which until now has operated largely on private donations, has recently hired an Executive Director; Gabi Youran to help identify additional revenue sources.

Since Rachael's First Week relies heavily on volunteers, Myers encourages anyone interested in helping to reach out via the group's website. A mother of two teens herself, Myers says the organization's message grabbed her on an emotional level, and she slowly took on more and more responsibilities. "When you meet Angi, you just want to help," Myers said. "She is just such a very strong person."

What thought does Myers most want to leave with readers? "It's easy to think that tragedies can't happen in our own communities," she said. "I can't stress enough the importance of looking out for each other. Being aware of those around you can make all the difference in someone's life."

For more information, or to make a donation:



www.Rachael'sfirstweek.org
PO Box 556, Zionsville, IN 46077

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