

Rachael's FIRST WEEK

By Angi Fiege, MD



August 13 - another typical day at work. I had just had “the talk” with a family who’s loved one had tragically slipped into irreversible multisystem organ failure. After giving the family the option of escalating the care of their loved one, or engaging in a terminal wean, the family tearfully chose a death with dignity. I completed the necessary orders to provide comfort for the family and the patient, and then my thoughts drifted to Rachael – my daughter whom I had dropped off at Indiana University the day before. I knew she was going to meet up with friends and head to a party hosted by upperclassmen who previously attended Rachael’s old high school. “Stay in a pack and be careful. I love you. I’ll talk to you tomorrow,” I texted her around 11:30 pm. “Aww Momma. I love you too,” she texted back. It would be my last text to Rachael. Two hours later she fell down a steep flight of stairs, striking her head. No one thought she was hurt – she didn’t have a mark on her. Her friends did what their moms had always done when they didn’t feel well – let her lie down on the sofa and cover her with a blanket. And, that sofa is where Rachael quit breathing from her traumatic brain injury. At 8:30am, only a few hours after the fall, I was finishing up paperwork at Methodist when I got the call – the call every parent dreads if they dare let their mind wander to the unthinkable. Rachael was at Bloomington Hospital. She had been in cardiac arrest. No need to send the helicopter – she was “too unstable.” I raced to Bloomington Hospital and found my way to the ICU. My beautiful daughter lay there connected to all the machines and monitors that I have come to rely on in the ICU. I lifted her

eyelids – her pupils were fixed and widely dilated. An apnea test and EEG confirmed her brain death. During the hours that ensued, Rachael’s body struggled to perfuse her kidneys and liver as the organ donation process limped along. Twenty eight hours after the fall, my husband, my son, and I walked with Rachael and members of the organ procurement team to the operating room for our last goodbye. Rachael disappeared behind the OR door. Silence – it was done.

I know I am not the only parent or the only physician who has lost a child out of sync with the natural order of life. Although it is easy to wallow in self-pity and perseverate over the “what ifs,” those become little more than toxic thoughts. The reality is that, despite our efforts to teach our children well and caution them about the hazards of independent life as they enter adulthood, they still are often woefully unprepared to make mature decisions when they encounter novel situations. In Rachael’s case, her friends did not intentionally ignore her. Nor do I believe they were looking after their own well being, trying to avoid punitive action by not calling EMS because of the underage drinking at that party. They did not recognize the problem and were not vigilant in looking out for each other – something most had never had to do because, as parents, we work so hard to protect them.

Like other parents who have experienced the untimely death of their child, I looked for a way to prevent any other parent or sibling or friend from enduring the horrific anguish that comes with the death of a child. Unfortunately, what happened

RFW continued...

to Rachael is not particularly unique. The facts are that the demographic of young adults entering college is unrecognized as a uniquely vulnerable population. While college freshmen account for approximately 25% of all undergraduates, roughly half of all undergraduate deaths occurring on college campuses nationwide occur among first year students. If statistics hold true, approximately 1,800 college freshmen will die of alcohol related injuries this year. Forty percent of all undergraduate suicides occur among freshmen. In a study published just this fall, 19% of college freshmen women reported that they were the victims of an attempted or completed rape. How can this happen if we as parents invest so much of ourselves teaching, if not preaching, to our graduating high school seniors about using common sense and



Angi with her daughter Rachael. Photo courtesy of Rachel's First Week

under the umbrella of our protection. And partly because we think it “only happens to those other kids.” Colleges are in the business of educating students to become mature functional members of society. And while most universities have safeguards in place to protect students,

“Taking a leadership role in RFW has been immensely fulfilling. I get to collaborate with truly inspiring individuals to create and deliver presentations that positively impact thousands of college and high school students.” - Adam Dunstone

avoiding risk-taking behaviors? Partly because 18-year-olds are caught in the paradox of being legal adults, but often they do not possess the maturity to make adult decisions. As parents we want believe that our childrearing skills are so good as to make our children exempt from taking risks when they are no longer

universities are not there to be a surrogate parent. And for these reasons, Rachael's First Week was born.

The concept occurred to me about six months after Rachael's burial, but the program blossomed and grew only under the tireless work of members

IUEM Alumni Alex Rhea, Angi, Jill Castor (Methodist Injury Prevention Coordinator) and Adam Dunstone at Rachael's alma mater, Zionsville High School. Photo courtesy of Rachel's First Week



of the Indiana University Emergency Medicine Residency. Alex Rhea MD (class of 2015) spent countless hours developing content and assisting with technical support. Jill Sracic (class of 2014) and Emily Fitz (class of 2015) had the creativity to produce the heart stopping video that introduces the attendees to the program. Many others have volunteered their time and efforts to making this program relevant to high school seniors and college freshmen, including current residents Adam Dunstone, Ashley Grigsby, Sarah Hemming-Meyer, Matt Connelly, Jake Capito, and Matt Swarm, as well as other residents whose names I regret I have not included but who have volunteered to help.

The program begins with a short video about Rachael's injury set to the Beyoncé's “I was there” (hauntingly one of Rachael's favorite songs). Following the video, two EM residents exchange comments across the stage to focus on five salient points:

1. Know the laws - focusing on the life-line law
2. Know what you're putting in your body – describing the hazards of mixing stimulants with alcohol and the abuse of Adderall, which is ubiquitous across college campuses
3. It never hurts to ask, but it will if you don't – focusing on suicide and mental health issues
4. Have a designated buddy – be a designated buddy because it will never happen to you until it happens – focusing on assault
5. Always look out for each other – the tag line

RFW continued...

Interspersed among the content, Rachael's friends from high school and soccer join the discussion with their real-life experiences when starting college: what they knew, what they wished they knew, and how Rachael's death has affected their behavior in college. Attendees are encouraged to bring their cell phones and participate in live polling questions asked throughout the program with the results projected on a large screen. Participants can also free text questions that all the attendees can see while affording them anonymity to ask a question in a large public forum. The content doesn't end with the program. There is a vibrant social media blitz on Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Snapchat and Vine that is timed to come out when college students are statistically on the phones and partying. Since its inception in May 2013, the program has been presented to over 4,000 students in area high schools and all the major universities in Indiana. We continue to get requests not only from Indiana, but as far away as South Carolina and Louisiana.

The potential for Rachael's First Week is endless. What started out a grassroots effort by the residents and Rachael's friends has exploded, thanks to the ongoing support of the IUEM residency but also with financial support from Goodman-Campbell Brain and Spine, the Methodist Health Foundation, and countless financial donors who look at their graduating seniors and feel the uncertainty of letting go. Plans are in



Angie speaks at Butler University. Since May 2013 the program has been presented to over 4000 students. Photo courtesy of Rachel's First Week

the works for a parent program and a fraternity/sorority program to meet the unique needs of those who may benefit from looking at the content from a different angle. In the past two months, we have garnered the support from the Emergency Medicine Student Interest Group (EMSIG) which will add a new fresh face to the program and the Emergency Nurses Association that will be assisting with content development and outcome measures. The effect of the program is difficult to quantify, as it is impossible to know how many student interventions prevented the injury or death of a fellow student, be it a friend or a stranger. I have many anecdotal stories, which we are compiling into a segment called "Rachael's Heroes" on our webpage, but the number of real saves will likely never be known.

There is not a second that goes by that I am not thinking about Rachael. What I have learned from this tragedy is that the compassion of others who have been as passionate about spreading the story of my daughter, someone they never met, to other young adults, also whom they have never met, has lifted me out of the abyss and has hopefully prevented the pain of countless other parents, siblings, and friends. My request is that in this time of reflection as the holidays approach, take a moment to love on your children and forget the little annoyances they may cause. Look at your colleagues who may be suffering silently and know that a word of encouragement can be a game changer. Forgive your patients and their families for their absurd and difficult behavior, knowing they are operating under stress. And look at your community and see how you and a small army of like-minded colleagues can change a life. Happy Holidays.

Learn more and connect with Rachael's First Week



#RFW

Editor's Note: Many of our 1990's grads will remember Angi Fiege as a flight nurse colleague who flew on Life Line with them. She graduated from IUSM in 2005 and from our residency in 2008, then completed a critical care fellowship at Methodist Hospital. She has worked there as a CCM faculty since that time. ■