

Mom whose son was killed by intoxicated boater advocates for other drunken driving victims in McHenry County

Margaret Borgia shares story of son's death, supports others who have lost loved ones to drunken and distracted drivers

By Amanda Marrazzo January 05, 2024 at 6:00 am CST



Margaret Borgia, holds a photograph of her son, Tony, who was killed by an intoxicated boater in 2012. She now works in McHenry County courthouse and other courthouses as a victim advocate for AAIM. (Gregory Shaver/Gregory Shaver)

It was supposed to be a fun summer day for the Borgia family boating and tubing on the Chain O' Lakes, but it suddenly turned tragic when an intoxicated boater ran into and killed the youngest of their four children.

Ten-year-old Tony Borgia had just fallen off his inflatable tube and was bobbing in the waters of Petite Lake.

As Tony's father, James Borgia, who was on the boat with Tony's three siblings, circled back to pick him up, a boat driven by a man who later admitted he was under the influence of cocaine and alcohol struck and killed him.

“[We] just don’t want Tony’s death to be in vain. It helps us if something good could come from it.”

— Margaret Borgia, mother of 10-year-old Tony Borgia killed in 2012 in Petite Lake by a drunken boater

“It is indescribable what we went through,” James Borgia recalled of that day, July 28, 2012. “I will never forget the contrast of what a beautiful day we were having. ... you never expect it. It’s just crazy how your life changes in a split second.”

Today, Margaret Borgia, a former attorney, works as an advocate for the Alliance Against Intoxicated Motorists, known as AAIM.

Her work includes speaking on victim impact panels and sitting with others who have suffered the same loss during court proceedings in the McHenry County and Lake County courtrooms, as well as in Cook County’s Skokie courthouse.

In the years since, the Libertyville family also has attempted to work through their pain of losing Tony.

James Borgia recalled his son as the family’s “mama’s boy” who loved playing Wiffle ball and who wanted to grow up to be a professional baseball player for the White Sox.

Margaret Borgia described him as “just the funniest, quirkiest little kid who had this goofy sense of humor and this giant smile with these big dimples.”

The family has gotten stronger following Tony’s death and has sought counseling and leaned onto their faith in trying to move on, James Borgia said.

“I fight every day not to remember what happened on that lake that day,” James Borgia said. “As time goes by, I think about the good things with him and being thankful for having him for 10 years, as opposed to not having him for 60 years.”

Shortly after Tony’s death, Margaret Borgia, who was not with her family that day, began speaking publicly about the day her son was killed in “pretty great detail” and of the immense pain it has caused her and her family.

She said she tells the story in detail so people “can understand these [accidents] are so violent and so traumatic and so unexpected.”

She said her work as an AAIM advocate is her way of giving back the support she received when she endured the court proceedings of David Hatyina, who was convicted in 2013 of aggravated driving under the influence of drugs and alcohol in her son’s death.

She has been an advocate for about 40 families over the past three years.

“It helps to work with AAIM and sit with others who experienced the same thing,” Borgia said. “I find being in service to other people, in some ways, I am helping myself more than I am actually helping them.”

She said she had never heard of AAIM until after her son was killed; her own advocate's name was also Margaret. That advocate had lost her 16-year-old daughter in a crash involving an intoxicated driver.

"It was great to have someone there that really knew what you were going through," Borgia said.

When asked three years ago to work for AAIM – as she was walking into another speaking engagement to share Tony's story – she recalled thinking, "This is what I needed to do."

"It has been one of the best decisions," she said.



A boater travels across Petite Lake near Lake Villa, where Tony Borgia was struck by an intoxicated boater and died in 2012. (Daily Herald file, 2012)

Rita Kreslin is executive director of AAIM, which provides grief support in courtrooms throughout Illinois, as well as financial help to families who have been affected by intoxicated and distracted drivers. She called Margaret Borgia "an amazing advocate."

Kreslin also received comfort from an AAIM advocate after losing her 19-year-old son, John Jr., in a 2003 crash while he was away at college in Indianapolis.

He was a front seat passenger and the driver, under the influence of marijuana and alcohol, was driving 65 mph on a 25-mph residential street and hit a tree. The driver and three backseat passengers survived, Kreslin said.

Kreslin said Borgia giving back what she has received is part of the healing.

"It takes a long time to work through it," Kreslin said. "You don't get over it, but you definitely work through it because you don't have a choice."

It can take some time before someone who has experienced such a tragedy is ready to become an advocate, she said.

“You have to come to a place where you can help other people, too,” Kreslin said. “You work through your own trauma as you help others.”

The Borcia family has founded The Y-noT Project, Tony’s name spelled backward, which he came up with himself one day as a play on his name.

The Y-noT Project sponsors an annual Wiffle ball tournament and has raised hundreds of thousands of dollars donated to the Illinois Department of Natural Resources, as well as to the McHenry and Lake County sheriff’s offices to help enforce laws against intoxicated boaters.

The family has raised more than \$300,000 and has given \$70,000 to IDNR and \$75,000 to Lake County Sheriff’s Office to help pay for boats to better patrol the Chain O’ Lakes. The Borcias also have helped pay for officer training, boating equipment, video equipment for the police boats, Breathalyzers and sheds to house the boats.

“[We donate] anything we can to help them in what they are doing to stop drunk boaters,” Margaret Borcia said.

They also donated \$40,000 to AAIM to purchase a specially equipped minivan for a woman who was paralyzed in an intoxicated driver crash, the Borcias said.



David Hatyina is taken away in hand cuffs from a Lake County courtroom after being sentenced to 10 years in prison in 2013 for the crash that killed Tony Borcia. (Daily Herald file, 2013/Daily Herald file, 2013)

James Borcia said that although each time he or his wife speak about the day Tony died is difficult, they continue to do it with the hopes it saves someone’s life.

He also said it feels good when he sees all the people who attend the annual Wiffle ball tournament and remember their son.

“Our goal from the beginning was to help prevent this from happening to other families,” James Borcia said. “It is in honor of Tony.”

James and Margaret Borcia said the charity’s main focus is on intoxicated boating, specifically on the Chain O’ Lakes, where it seems drinking and boating still is accepted.

The day Tony was killed was the first time the Borcias were on the Chain O' Lakes, and they saw just how dangerous it was. Before that day, they typically would go boating and tubing to lakes in Wisconsin, they said.

Tony's death also led to new legislation intended to make boating safer.

In 2015, a law sponsored by state Sen. Julie Morrison, D-Deerfield, Tony's aunt, requires boaters towing a person to display an orange flag. The flag is meant to alert nearby boaters that a person is being towed.

Another law sponsored by Morrison allows police to seize the crafts of intoxicated boaters in certain cases.

The Borcias "just don't want Tony's death to be in vain," Margaret Borcia said. "It helps us if something good could come from it."