

## The Long Road

I have started and re-started this more times than I can count. Even after the passing of five years, trying to put into words the emotions involved with the terrible crash of September 15, 2005 and the events that have followed is one of the most difficult things I have had to do. There is simply no adequate way to describe the sorrow and regret that I feel for the thousands of people who have been hurt by the selfish decision I made. There is also no way to express the gratitude that I feel to the families of Jared Cheek and Matthew Molnar. Thankfully, the tragic events of that evening do not form the end of the story. The Alliance Against Intoxicated Motorists, along with the families of Matty and Jared, have helped me to move forward and to do all I can to redeem that terrible decision.

Before telling some of the events of the evening of the crash, I want to share something of the lives of the two men that were killed. Jared, Matty and I were all students at Mundelein Seminary discerning the possibility of becoming ordained priests in the Catholic Church. Both Matty and Jared were from the Archdiocese of Kansas. Matty was 28 and Jared was 23. Matty was an excellent musician who used music to share his experience of God with so many. Jared was an athlete and a key player on the Seminary basketball team. They both had an incredible ability to connect with young people helping them to see God at work in their lives. It is not an exaggeration to say that Matty and Jared have touched the lives of thousands of people in a very profound ways.

The night of the crash was a Wednesday evening of the second week of September. We had all just returned from summer and did not have classes the following day. At 8:30 that evening, I accepted an invitation to go with a friend to a nearby bar and grill for a beer and some time to catch up from the summer. We took his car to a place on the corner of Hwy 45 and Hwy 176 called Emil's. While we were at Emil's a group of four other students, including Matty and Jared arrived. After about two hours, two from the second group decided to return to campus, leaving Matty, Jared, my friend who had driven and me. While we were at Emil's, we had all been drinking and during the time I was there I had two Long Island Iced Teas. As we got up to leave, my friend who had driven looked at me, handed me the keys to the car and said, "Rob, you're going to have to drive. There were so many things I could have and should have done that night. I could have called any one of the 200 men back on campus, I could have called for a cab, it was a beautiful September evening, and we could have walked back to campus. Unfortunately, I didn't choose any of those options. I had been drinking and I was drunk. Not only were my reflexes impaired that night, but my thinking was clouded as well. A truth that I have learned is that when you start drinking you stop thinking. When I decided to drive the car that night, I did not have the courage to do what I knew was right and with the alcohol in my system, I didn't have the sense to realize the danger of what I was doing. The awful decision to drive that evening resulted in the death of two great men and great pain in the lives of so many. Even after five years, I am still learning about people who have suffered because of the loss of Matty and Jared.

I realize that most of the offender stories in this book are attempts to demonstrate the horrific results of drunk driving. While that has certainly been true in my life, I have also been given the proverbial second chance. I want to share with you some of the ways that AAIM has been instrumental in helping me to heal, repent and rebuild.

I have to admit that when I learned that part of my sentence was to work with AAIM, I was frightened. I wasn't sure if I would ever be able to share this experience in my life. I was afraid at how people at AAIM might respond to me. Most of all, I was overwhelmed with the thought of being on a panel with someone who had been injured or had a family member killed by a drunk driver. As I have already

mentioned, putting words to this tragedy has been so difficult. I remember faxing and talking with Pat Larson, long before I had met her in person, as she firmly but compassionately helped me to put the truth of my story in writing. Dave Perozzi was the first victim speaker who I worked with. He assured me that he knew speaking would be difficult but that it was very important as well. Many of you sacrificed so much to drive me to panels and events. You opened your lives in a way I could never have imagined. I really wish that I had the space here to list each person in AAIM whom I have met over the past five years. Each of you has deeply touched my life. You have shared your pain, your hope and even at times your anger. I have seen you work tirelessly for laws that reflect that extreme seriousness of this crime. I have felt the heartache as you accompanied families through the pain of loss. I have witnessed the frustration of feeling like an anonymous organization. I have watched you try to help victims journey to forgiveness and reconciliation. I have experienced the anger and feelings of betrayal at the news of a repeat offender. I have also been the recipient of your kindness, understanding and even love.

When this crash happened, I felt in so many ways like my life too had ended. I couldn't imagine any possible way forward. But, as with so many things, time allows for change. In the spring of 2009, I was able to graduate from Catholic Theological Union in Chicago and return to Wyoming. In August of 2009, I was ordained as a priest. Having the families of Matty and Jared at the ordination was one of the greatest gifts I could imagine.

Sometimes people ask when I'll finally be able to forget about what happened; when I'll be able to put it all behind me. I can't think of a more inappropriate question. Driving drunk was a decision that has changed my life forever. The experiences of pain, loss, forgiveness and redemption have shaped the person I have become. In the language of my faith, the actions of AAIM and the families of Matty and Jared have put flesh on the message of Jesus. You have shown the power of love in action and have allowed the possibility of redemption.

For sure, there have been challenging and even painful times working with AAIM, but I can say without a doubt that I would not have been able to move forward in my life without the help of so many of you. I know you realize the value of your work in the lives of the victims of drunk driving. My hope is that you also understand the power you have to change the lives of drunk drivers as well.

Forever Grateful,

Rob.