

We learnt to wear masks

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Counselling client



The last time that I talked with my beautiful 16-year-old son Rory McCaffrey was in the evening on 28 December 2011. It was a casual conversation and, amongst other things that I now find hard to remember, I pressed him to get to bed and have an early night's sleep. Earlier in the month he had completed his year 11 studies and then picked up his first job as a lifeguard at a local water park on the Bellarine Peninsula. It was soon to be his 17th birthday on New Years' Eve. His long summer holidays were stretching out in front of him. I was working between Christmas and New Year and relishing the idea of having most of January off with Rory and the rest of the family.

I subsequently learnt that Rory didn't have an early night that night. He went to his room and played some games on his laptop and somewhere after 1am received a text from friends who asked him to come for a drive to get some take away food. They were around Rory's age and unlicensed. In the still of an early summer's night they drove around the Bellarine Peninsula until the driver lost control of the car on a section of gravel road whilst driving at over 200 km an hour. The car hurtled through a fence, into a paddock and crashed into the only tree within view. Rory was killed instantly and my life, and the lives of my family friends and his friends, were irrevocably changed forever.

Around 5.30 on the morning of 29 December, my husband and I were woken by loud knocking on the front door of our home. It was the local Police who had been given the unenviable task of coming to inform us about Rory's death. When my husband came to tell me what they had said I experienced a level of disorientation, desolation and disbelief unlike anything that I had ever felt. The shock of this news was so absolute that I was only taking in random words that seemed disjointed and surreal. He was still at the accident site – did we want to go there, or maybe that wouldn't be such a good idea? He would be taken to the Coroner's facility in Melbourne and we would need to go and identify him the following day – did we have someone who could drive us there? The major collision unit officers would be coming to the accident scene and would then call by our house later in the day – did we want a cup of tea? It was literally gut wrenching.

The hours and days after Rory's death were unbearable and I don't know how any of us got through them. We made the phone calls that no parent should ever have to make to explain why we wouldn't be at work and why Rory wouldn't be at work; to seek solace from friends and family who were struggling with the unbearable news themselves. We planned a funeral instead of a birthday party and learnt

to wear masks that said, "we're OK" when we really weren't. We woke every morning in utter disbelief that this had happened and that we had no power to claw the clock back and intervene – to change the outcome. Isn't that what parents are supposed to do?

I will always remain grateful to my manager, and friend, who connected us to the RTSSV. At first, we had phone counselling with Christine Rawson and then we would catch up – sometimes at home, sometimes out somewhere but always where we felt able to manage. Christine saw us individually and worked with us together and her calm, supportive manner helped us in ways that are hard to describe. Through her connections with others who had experienced road trauma, we came to feel connected and less isolated in our deep and unabating grief. Even though our contact lessened over time, Christine and all the RTSSV counsellors were always available. They gave me a significant amount of support when I wrote a book on my experience of road trauma. They connected me with other women who had lost children which made me realise that, through road trauma although our stories are unique, they reflect very similar experiences of the brutal impact of road trauma and the ways in which we choose to piece our lives together again.