

Stop and Think

Written by admin

Wednesday, 19 June 2013 12:50 - Last Updated Wednesday, 19 June 2013 13:09

By Tessa Middleton



"All rise," the bailiff instructs.

The stern-faced judge enters the room, her black robes flowing. She has a reputation for giving stiff sentences. I notice she bears a strong resemblance to Judge Judy--this can't be good. "Please be seated," she orders.

I'm in the courtroom to hear the victim impact statements before I'm sentenced. I've pleaded guilty of negligent vehicular homicide in the death of my best friend, Daniel, and the paralysis of Jeremy, his brother. I think about this every day. The remorse never leaves me.

My attorney has already warned me that, under the circumstances, I could receive up to ten years in prison.

Today I will learn my fate.

Sure, I had seen the ads and heard all the warning from Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD). I knew I shouldn't drink and drive. But I was confident; I could handle my booze. I was a great driver. I'd never had an accident before--never even had a ticket. Besides, it's not as if I hadn't drank a beer before. I tried beer a few times in the past. Funny--I didn't even like the taste of beer. But I was legal age now--I needed to celebrate, right?

Daniel and Jeremy sprinted out their door; Daniel pushed the remains of yesterday's pizza off

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the front passenger seat and slid in. "Hey, bro, happy birthday!" He laughed and gave me a high-five.

"Yeah, happy birthday! You're 'The Man!'" Jeremy had climbed into the backseat. "Where to?" he added.

Seatbelts clicked shut.

"To get the Brewski, then it's to the beach and the babes!" I responded. We all hooted, cheered, and I drove off.

We stopped at the convenience store near the beach. Proudly, I placed the twelve-pack of beer on the counter. The clerk eyed me suspiciously. "You got an I.D. for that?"

"Sure do." Confidently, I slapped my driver's license down. Can't you see I'm 'The Man'? I mused.

At the beach it didn't take long to drink the beer, maybe an hour or two. Jeremy had a couple; Daniel had three or four; and I guess I downed the rest. We laughed it up and had a great time.

I knew I was feeling the effects when I stumbled back to the car.

Out of nowhere, I heard a shocked voice. "Mike? Are you drunk?" It was Mandy, a girl I knew since high school. "You can't drive in that condition! Let me drive you home."

"Naw, I'm jus' fine, I slurred.

Daniel and Jeremy's mother takes the stand. She cries and tells how much pain and suffering the accident has caused her and the entire family; she tells how much she loves and misses Daniel.

Then she does the unbelievable! She asks the judge to be lenient on me. She says Daniel loved me like a brother, and he wouldn't want my life to be ruined because of this foolish mistake.

Next, they wheel Jeremy to the front; he's paralyzed from the waist down. There's no hope of recovery; he'll never walk again.

Voice cracking, he also asks the judge to give me the minimum sentence possible.

Our eyes meet, and he says, "I forgive you, man."

The judge shuffles through her papers and turns to me. "Do you have a statement to make before I pass sentence?"

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"Just that I'm sorry. I have no excuse. I wish I could go back change it. I wasn't thinking." I stop speaking. There's nothing more I can say. Anything I say sounds trite. I feel dead inside.

The room is quiet. It seems like an eternity before the judge speaks again.

"A young man has died and another's life has permanently changed because of your actions; but, because the victims have pleaded on your behalf, I hereby sentence you to three years, which is the minimum allowable by law, for the charges you are guilty of."

The gavel pounds down.

My prison term is over now. I spent most of it thinking about what happened. Jeremy and I corresponded regularly while I was in jail, and I visit him often now that I'm out.

I know I have Jeremy's forgiveness; and, through Jeremy, I learned how to find forgiveness from God. I'm still working on forgiving myself.

I'll never forget Daniel--nor will I forget the compassion his family has shown me.

Hopefully, my story will make others "stop and think."

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