

Parent Witness Talk –Emmaus Retreat for Grieving Parents

My name is Christine Shields. I was born in Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania, but grew up in Central Florida since the age of 12. At the insistence of my college boyfriend, we married quickly after I graduated college. Since I could not afford continuing my education as a young married adult, I began working full time and learned how to become an efficient Administrative Assistant. Time was ticking and I was not getting any younger. I prayed to God, “Lord, I would like to be a mother, but I enjoy working as well. Your Will be done, Lord. If you want me to become a mother, please allow me to conceive a child in your perfect timing and according to your Perfect Will”. Two years after I prayed that prayer, I found out I was pregnant with my first child! At the same time that I became pregnant, I was selected as a soloist in a City of Jacksonville religious musical program, “Giver of Life”. “Giver of Life” was a religious, musical cantata about the life, ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus. I believe that God himself, the true giver of life, and was blessing me by creating a new life within me. Blessed be the Name of the Lord!

My son, Benjamin Andrew, was born on July 10, 1995 in Jacksonville, Florida. I couldn't believe that God had blessed us with such a beautiful and amazing gift of Baby Ben. I also was blessed with 2 daughters, Angela Faith, born on April 28, 1997, and Lydia Joy, born on June 25, 1999. Ben was baptized at our church in Jacksonville, and received his First Holy Communion, Reconciliation, and Confirmation at St. Mary Magdalen Church in Altamonte Springs.

Ben's greatest passion was Music. When Ben was a toddler, he received his first drum, and playing it since those early days helped percussion to become one of his favorites. Ben loved all kinds of singing, especially singing in four part harmony as a member of the Lake Howell High School Chorus Groups. A major highlight of his choral experience each year was singing in Disney's Candlelight Processional at Epcot Center at Christmas. He was also thrilled to attend overnight barbershop summer camps each year. The 2011 “Sing Off” Acapella competition which we watched together as a family, introduced 16 year old Ben to his favorite Acapella group, Pentatonix. The subsequent commercial success of Pentatonix and other Acapella music not only helped Ben to become a better beat boxer, but shaped his dream to become a professional sound engineer. These strengths translated well into Ben's other greatest passion in technology. Ben was tech savvy providing the foundation for his great success as an online entrepreneur. His primary talent was in buying, fixing, and then selling all kinds of electronics for a profit. Thanks to Ben, half the family are proud owners of the latest, greatest Smart Phone, or other desired electronic device.

As a toddler, Ben was nicknamed by his Nana, Gentle Ben, and that is how he lived every day of his life. Ben was naturally a compassionate, friendly and laid back person. His first full-time job at the Mayflower Retirement Community in Winter Park was where those personality traits shined the brightest in his humble service to hundreds of elderly residents every day. It was his

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kindness to all he met there that made him everyone's honorary grandson. Ben was blessed to have many friends, including several treasured best ones. Favorite friend activities included making music using various electronics and instruments, competing in local trivia nights, seeing the latest sci-fi and action movies, playing board games, and eating out. Ben was the beloved big brother, not only to his siblings, but to his cousins. He was the beloved grandson on all sides of the family – setting the example of respect for his elders, an increasingly rare trait among young people today. His aunts and uncles loved Ben as another son from day one, a love that strengthened exponentially each time we were together. To me as his Mom, Ben was my greatest dream come true. As a first born son, he was the answer to prayer. We never heard Ben say anything bad about anyone else. Through his kindhearted nature, it was easy to love him and we were so proud to have him as our son. Ben was not only our son, but a best friend, who cherished the time he spent with his family. That included road trips, camping and hiking, theme parks, beach weekends, and all kinds of outings. It didn't matter where we went as long as we were together.

Then, it happened...out of nowhere...the unexpected...a Mother's Worst Nightmare, became my reality on Wednesday, February 7, 2018: Ben was driving home from the gym after his work out at about 9:30 at night. He was minding his own business and was attempting to make a left hand turn onto Lake of the Woods Blvd. from Highway 71/92 in Fern Park. A 17 year old young man, out on parole, driving without a license, in a stolen vehicle, fleeing police and going at a high rate of speed was trying to get through the traffic light before it turned red. My son was trying to make his left hand turn and apparently did not see this speeding black bullet of a car coming towards him. My son's car was hit broadside, spun out of control, went airborne, and was propelled into the traffic pole. Ben died instantly at the scene. He didn't have a chance. He was pinned into his vehicle so tightly, that that it took the first responders 2 hours to be able to extract his body from his mangled car. The 17 year old however, who caused the accident survived and has fully recovered from his injuries. Ben's girlfriend was following him in traffic and witnessed the whole accident scene. She immediately called me and we all rushed to the scene about a half of a mile from our home. I still remember frantically praying to God to please let Ben be alright! Please God, please let Ben be okay! We drove up and I could see numerous emergency lights flashing on the road and the traffic blocked. I raced to get out of the van, but my husband beat me to the Highway Patrol Officers. My husband slowly turned around before I made it there, and he quietly and calmly had to tell me that Ben was gone. I said, "No! No!" He can't be gone. No! That can't be true! They need to get him out now! Why aren't they getting him out of the car?" I remember my body going limp in my husband's arms as he tried to comfort me, but my clenched fists were beating my husband's chest with No. Ben's sister's Angela and Lydia, and his girlfriend, Jenna, were with us, and they didn't even have to ask what happened...They knew by my reaction and weeping that their brother was gone, and they started weeping as well. But all of sudden, in the midst of my grief, I somehow

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found strength. I realized I needed to call my family members immediately to let them know about the accident, and to come right away. Then it occurred to me to call my parish emergency line, and my pastor, Fr. Charlie, quickly came to meet me and my family at the scene of the accident. It took 2 hours for the first responders to let Fr. Charlie come near Ben's body to bless his body, and identify his body for us. Then I started texting my co-workers while standing out there at the scene of the accident telling them about what happened. (I did almost all of the phone calls and text messages at the scene of my son's accident – which was about 4 hours' time from about 9:50 p.m. -2:15 a.m. When we finally made it home without Ben, I couldn't sleep. I just picked up Ben's photo and hugged it close to me and cried. Then I realized that the news reporters were at the scene of the accident! I didn't want my friends to find out about Ben's accident from the news! I had to compose a Facebook post to let everyone know myself that very night. Somehow God gave me the strength to do that! I look back on this now, and think, "How did I do that"?

We are heartbroken; ...we want Ben here with us. It occurred to me, in the dark hours shortly after losing our Ben that perhaps God was preparing Ben for this all along. You see, Ben was blessed with some of the greatest life experiences a person could hope for in the last months of his life. He got to fall in love with his dream girl, Jenna. He got to travel to big cities in the US and abroad. While our family has always made fun trips a priority, the trip to Washington, DC and South Carolina visiting family his last summer was truly one of the greatest of his life, and it seems like the hand of God himself allowed us to win a fabulous day all together at Sea World just four days before the accident. Forever that magical, beautiful day all together at Sea World was our family's last day with Ben, not Wednesday. We are so grateful to have had it.

Ben was a gift from God, the son we prayed for, the one we gladly dedicated our lives to taking care of. It was our greatest joy. During the last months of Ben's life, that joy was returned to us as our Ben selflessly gave back to each of us in his own way. There are a lot of examples, but today, I will share two of the best. Ben's last spring, he purchased the plane ticket for me as a gift to attend my beloved cousin's funeral in Pennsylvania. Without it, I would not have been able to go. The second example is his proud excitement to surprise the family on Christmas morning with a new, 65 inch flat screen television. Not only did he give gifts like the television, he gave the gift of his presence singing in the choir at midnight Mass alongside me and sisters for the first time. Ben's giving to us in these meaningful ways is only just the beginning, for as people of faith, we believe Ben is in heaven. He will continue to give back to each one of us every day in the most beautiful, profound ways that we cannot even envision over the course of each of our lives. Ben's physical presence may not be here although he will always be with us. His tragic ending is our new beginning – we owe that to Ben.

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Where have I been spiritually since the loss of Ben?

For me as a mother, 21 months after Ben's tragic car accident that took his life, I know that it is all the prayers of God's people that have been carrying me and giving me the strength I need to continue on my life's journey without Ben being physically with me. However, right after the loss of Ben, I want to highlight that there was that temptation to seclude or isolate myself in my grief. I think a lot of parents deal with this after the heartache of losing a child. I had to consciously decide that I would not give into that temptation to seclude or isolate myself in my grief, but to let people in – allow my family and friends to comfort me, bring meals over, receive flowers, gifts, cards, phone calls, text messages, and receive their expressions of love and comfort. I decided to graciously receive all of that – despite how much it hurt, despite the pain, despite my grief. Ben would want me to do that! Ben would want me to go on with my life. Ben would want me to be happy, and not to wallow in my grief. I came to the realization that even though Ben's life here on earth was over, my life wasn't over, and I am still here for a purpose! Ben would want me to find and live out God's call on my life! I believe this realization changed the focus of my grief from being "Self-Centered" to "God-Centered".

People would ask me how I was doing, and I would respond, "One day at a time", and literally, that is what I had to do to keep going. I went back to work a week and a half after my son's accident, which was 3 days after his funeral. I kept working my job at the Diocese of Orlando, and continued all of my ministries at St. Mary Magdalen Parish. The first-time through the holidays was very difficult without him, especially his birthday and Christmas. For Ben's first birthday without him, I decided to turn a negative into a positive by planning "Ben's Memorial Party" and invited my family, and Ben's friends. We served Ben's favorite foods of hamburgers and hot dogs, and I even baked his favorite chocolate M & M Cake. During the party, we shared photos and funny stories about our varied experiences with Ben during the course of his life. This Memorial Party really helped me and my family over the "hump" of Ben's first birthday without him. For our first Christmas Season without Ben, I purchased a Christmas lantern that I kept lit during all of our family festivities over the Christmas holidays to remember Ben: during our holiday dinners, during the opening of presents, and as we brought in the New Year, Ben was there with us in spirit reminding us that he was there through the constant flickering flame in that Christmas lantern. The front panel of the Christmas lantern reads: "Because Someone we Love is in Heaven...there's a little bit of HEAVEN in our home at Christmas".

Then, I was faced with another painful date coming up: the first anniversary of Ben's passing. Similar to what we did for his birthday, we planned another Memorial Party for Ben around the first anniversary of Ben's passing, in February of this year. I invited my family, Ben's friends, and we served Ben's favorite foods. At that Memorial Party, my family presented me with a Crepe Myrtle tree that will be called, "Ben's Tree" and will have a prominent place in my yard.

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I went through a six (6) week Grief Support Group at my parish Spring 2018, and attended the Emmaus Retreat for Grieving Parents last March at St. James Cathedral. Now I have been asked to be a part of the retreat team for future retreats for Grieving Parents. I know that Ben is with Jesus in Heaven, because I had a glorious dream of my son during Holy Week last year, of him walking with Jesus in a bright, beautiful, and peaceful place. In this dream, Ben and Jesus were talking and laughing at a distance.

I believe Ben hears me every time I talk to him. I've been visiting Ben's grave weekly changing out the flowers and tidying up his grave - this has given me comfort. Also, a long-time family friend had the idea and provided the materials for a Memory Garden to be planted in my front yard for Ben. Ben's Tree is planted in the center of Ben's Garden, and is thriving by being full of white blooms this past summer. Ben's Memory Garden also has brought me and my family comfort and peace.

Watering and tending to Ben's Garden in my yard has given me comfort. I will often see beautiful, monarch butterflies float around the flowers, or even once in a while, see a red cardinal nearby!

As it was read during Ben's Eulogy at his funeral: We challenge you to find one thing we can do in honor of Ben's legacy, whatever it may be:

Forgive, Heal, Let Go, Move Forward, Carpe Diem, Live, Laugh, Dream Big, Love, Hope, Believe.

Look for that opportunity TODAY: Live each day as if it were our last, for none of us are guaranteed tomorrow.