



# Watching the Influence

By Brianna Jane Johnson

**WAS SITTING** in Mr. Zika's sixth grade English class when it happened. He told me to go down to the office because a message was waiting there for me. I was barely out of the classroom when my sister came running towards me. Her face was bright red and instead of a smile, her face fashioned a hard grimace. Rather than explaining why she was there, she grabbed my arm and pulled me towards the parking lot where our family's van was waiting. Once we were in the van, I saw that my mom was there crying. Then, in three words, my sister gave me an explanation to why I was pulled out of class, "Bobby is dead."

My mom weaved in and out of heavy traffic leading to the car accident site. We pulled up next to a police officer and explained that we were the family of the boy in the car accident. He looked at us with an expression of pity and proceeded to wave us through the various blockades. My mom parked the van far away from the accident because she did not want my sister or me to see the wreckage of the car or any bodies that were waiting inside it.

My sister and I did not speak while we waited for my mom to return. The only sounds I heard were from my sister's grief. She sat there sobbing and hitting her arms against the dash board. Then, everything changed when my brother, Bobby, appeared in front of us—unharmful. My sister ran to him and hugged him; he did not hug her back. When he climbed into the van with us, all he said was, "She died."

On February 11, 2005 my brother drove himself and his girlfriend, Angela Ryan, to their counseling appointment. He was under the influence of marijuana and alcohol when they crashed into a telephone pole. The car wrapped around the pole on the passenger's side where Angela was sitting. Angela's body was twisted and mangled beyond recognition, but she managed to hold on to reality for a couple of minutes. During these minutes, my brother held onto her and they cried together while she died. The police officers had to pry him off of her dead body. Angela Ryan and her unborn baby died that spring afternoon.

My brother's grief from her death turned him into a monster, whose wrath could only be sated by meth. For three years, he used the drug relentlessly. He would sleep for four days straight, only getting up to eat. If you were to cross him in this state, he would have killed you or at least come close to it. No one spoke of what happened to my brother, nor did we talk about how he was dealing with Angela's death. We just all understood to stay out of his way or else we too would be dead. I feared him. I feared coming home after school. And I feared for the safety of my family.

During these three years, I did not realize that what I was experiencing was not normal. I believed that my friends families were going through the same thing. School was my only escape from what was happening; it was heaven on earth to me. I threw myself into my studies and became an A student.

My brother's trial was in December of 2007. He went to court, high on meth, and was sentenced to four years in prison for two counts of vehicle homicide. Even though prison is a tragedy in itself, my family welcomed it because this gave him the chance to become drug free.

It has been three years since the court date and my brother is home again. He is completely drug free and was released early from prison because of good behavior. He has been nothing but compassionate and remorseful since his return. Currently, he has a job at a local gas station and is filling out college applications.

The experiences of my childhood were out of the norm, but I now realize that these hardships helped me learn important lessons that my fellow high school classmates are just starting to discover. I witnessed firsthand how drugs can change someone you love into a dangerous criminal.

For these reasons, I have chosen to stay drug and alcohol free. I try to keep my friends away from drugs and alcohol, but they think drinking and smoking pot is the coolest thing they can do. I even tell them the story of my childhood and brother, but they say it's a one in a million chance it will happen to them. They laugh in my face and say I am too cautious. I feel sorry for them, because I want nothing more than to save them from the hardships my family experienced. Unfortunately, they are blind to see the consequences of their actions.

I realized I cannot help them without help. So, my family joined Minnesotans for Safe Driving. We are an organization that spreads the word of how driving under the influence can have horrible outcomes. Minnesotans for Safe Driving sponsors my brother's story and had the car from his accident mounted on a trailer. The trailer is moved around to different schools within Minnesota. Also, my brother goes to schools and tells his story to the students, hoping they will choose to be drug free. Later this year, my brother, at my request, will be giving a presentation to my high school. I'm hoping that my friends will listen to what my brother has to say and will become drug and alcohol free.

Rest in peace, Angela Ryan. I hope my family's actions prove your death not to have been in vain. 🙏

## ALERT SCHOLARSHIP

*Brianna Jane Johnson is a high school student from Minnesota. Alert Magazine congratulates her for winning the Alert Scholarship and we encourage her in the pursuit of her academic goals. We would also like to encourage future seniors to participate in our scholarship program.*