



Mother established Gordie Foundation in her son's memory to save other students and their families from alcohol-related tragedy

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On Thursday, thousands of high school and college students around the world will mark the second annual National Gordie Day.

It's named in honor of Lynn Gordon Bailey Jr. of Dallas, known as Gordie to his friends and his mother and stepfather, Leslie and Michael Lanahan. Gordie was 18 and a freshman at the University of Colorado five years ago when he drank whiskey and wine as part of a fraternity hazing, was left to "sleep it off" and died of alcohol poisoning.

The Lanahans could have withdrawn into their pain. Instead, they turned it into the Gordie Foundation, which establishes Circle of Trust chapters to address the dangers of peer pressure and hazing, teach the signs of alcohol poisoning and encourage young people to pledge to call for help as needed.

"If only someone had made that call for Gordie," Leslie Lanahan says at the foundation office on Swiss Avenue.

The Lanahans have set themselves a high mountain to climb. This year alone, 1,825 students ages 18-24 have died due to alcohol-related causes, according to the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism.

But the Lanahans keep at it because each of these young people has a face. Each had a future he or she will never see. Each has left family and friends to mourn a rip in their hearts that can never be mended.

And the foundation memorializes as many as they can in a giant poster of Gordie in its office that, if you look closely, is actually made up of smaller pictures of those who have died.

Megan Knapp is the health educator at Southern Methodist University, where the school will usher in National Gordie Day with a candlelight vigil Wednesday night followed by the placement of 1,825 flags Thursday to represent the death toll.

The event is offered in conjunction with National Hazing Prevention Week (sponsored by HazingPrevention.org) in recognition that this is a likely week for hazing.

The foundation reports that 135 institutions – high schools, colleges, fraternities and coalitions from as far away as Jordan and the United Arab Emirates – will participate in similar activities.

The Gordie Foundation has distributed more than 1,000 mirror clings for SMU, items it will reproduce and personalize for other schools on request. The mirror cling shows the six symptoms of alcohol poisoning: pale skin, confusion, irregular breathing, seizures, vomiting and passing out.

"Developmentally at this age, students think they're invincible," Knapp says.

"I think Gordie's story brings it home and makes it more real."

Brooks L. Powell, one of three students on SMU's President's Commission on Substance Abuse Prevention task force, was a sophomore when an SMU freshman drank too much at a sorority party and was left to sleep it off in his dorm room. The next morning he was dead.

"I was 19," Powell says. "I knew about hangovers, but I didn't know about alcohol poisoning. It was very traumatic."

That's when Powell sought out the Gordie Foundation, where he rose from summer intern to the foundation's educational programs coordinator. Powell, now 23 and starting his senior year, says he believes things have improved.

"Now people make the call when roommates come back intoxicated. A student was transferred to the hospital with a BA [blood alcohol level] of .360. He made it. Gordie died at .328." (A level above 0.08 percent is considered inebriated.)

Success stories are what Leslie Lanahan wants to hear. And yet the reminder of her child, who was not saved, hurts. I asked her how she finds the strength to wade through the daily pain.

"I don't want to forget," she says, her eyes filling with tears.

"I want to honor what I always felt would be Gordie's voice. As strange as it sounds, I think he would be shocked that he died and he would have wanted people to know that. I want his short, short life to make a difference." For more on the Gordie Foundation, visit www.gordie.org or the Dallas Moms blog, momsblog.dallasnews.com.