

## "It's every parent's worst nightmare"

An ornament hanging on the McKees' Christmas tree says "Baby's First Christmas - 1982."

Ryan McKee, and his family, will celebrate his 18th Christmas knowing that life is as fragile as that ornament.

He is still recovering from a one-car accident fueled by wet roads - and at least a few drinks.

The mishap occurred in the early morning of Sept. 7. Ryan, who was to begin his senior year of high school that week, had gone out to dinner with his family, and later prayed the family rosary at their home in the town of Ogden. He then got permission to stay overnight at a friend's house a few doors away.

Within hours, Ryan's mother, Laura, was awakened by sheriffs at the front door.

"It's every parent's worst nightmare, that pounding on the door," Laura McKee said.

"All of a sudden, your heart just grabs you," added her husband, Bill.

Within minutes, Ryan's parents and two sisters, Kate and Kerry, were en route to Strong Memorial Hospital. Ryan was on life support at the hospital, having suffered a severe head injury as well as numerous broken bones and lacerations. In fact, his parents figured he had died because they weren't allowed to see him.

From the information Bill and Laura could gather, Ryan had been drinking with his friends - enough to become impaired. He decided sometime after midnight that he wanted to visit another friend who lived several miles away.

"They admitted they were drinking. They said if they tried to take the keys away, he would have got mad at them," Laura said.

Ryan climbed into the car he had acquired only one week earlier, and drove off into a heavy rainstorm. Within minutes, while on Route 531, he lost control of his car and hit some rocks. Ryan was ejected through the rear window and was hurled several feet in the air before landing on his head. His parents noted that Ryan, perhaps because he was drinking, was not wearing a seat belt as he normally did. Had he done so, his father said, his injuries would have been significantly reduced.

Two passers-by came upon Ryan, and hours later he was at Strong Memorial being given only a 5 percent chance to survive.

"The first night there, the doctors told



Ryan McKee and his mom, Laura, here in their Ogden home, have reason to celebrate this holiday season, but also words of caution.

us he needed a miracle," Bill said.

A multitude of prayer and support began to help that miracle come about. Family and friends rushed to the hospital. In Spencerport, less than 48 hours after the accident, 50 people attended an impromptu prayer service at Ryan's parish, St. John the Evangelist. Jennifer Curatolo, who organized the event, arranged more weekly prayer services that lasted through early November.

Curatolo observed that Ryan has numerous friendships and is a special companion for troubled teens. "Ryan's the shoulder his friends would cry on - the person they'd call at 2 a.m.," said Curatolo, who assists with the St. John youth group. "No matter where Ryan was, he was always talking about God and saying, 'You've got to come to youth group.'"

Laura McKee noted that some teens have come back to their Catholic faith because of their prayers for Ryan. And Bill said that the tremendous support of Ryan has made a difference in his recovery.

"We've felt the power of prayer before in life, but never like this," Bill McKee remarked.

Incredibly, the miracle did occur. Ryan progressed out of danger and was transferred to St. Mary's Hospital in early October for rehabilitation. He went home the day after Thanksgiving.

"When I got out of the hospital, I was very happy," Ryan said.

He returned to St. John's Church Dec. 5 for the first time since his accident. After Mass, he was greeted by a huge throng of well-wishers.

"There were *too* many people who said hi," Ryan said with a smile.

Ryan still gets disoriented easily and although he recognizes family and friends, his overall memory is hazy and he recalls nothing about the accident. He speaks haltingly, in a slightly slurred tone, and gets frequent headaches along with other accident-related aches and pains. He walks, but with difficulty.

However, he's advanced many steps from a few weeks ago, when just the slightest move of a hand was cause for celebration.

"Ryan's made phenomenal progress," Bill McKee said.

Ryan now goes to a day-treatment program and is expected to slowly improve over the next two years.

"That's the only job I have now," Ryan said.

How far he will progress is uncertain, but at least some of the brain damage is permanent. Right now, his mother said, Ryan "is happy with the simple things in life" and hopes to begin attending youth-group events again in the near future.

The support continues. Ryan is visited often by friends, and his family has pulled tightly around him. For instance, sister Kate, 21, took this semester off from Boston College to stay with the family. Recently, when his youth group returned from the National Catholic Youth Conference in St. Louis, they gave Ryan a T-shirt filled with get-well messages from teens around the country.

"I haven't read them all yet," Ryan remarked.

Although Ryan's situation is on the upswing, his car crash is still hauntingly fresh in the memory of family and friends. Laura said that she hopes Ryan's peers will weigh the incident before they risk drinking and driving.

"When Ryan's life was still in jeopardy, I decided to let the kids in if it helped any of them know they could be in that bed," she remarked. "They were crying, getting down on their knees and praying. One person even fainted at seeing a friend so seriously injured by overindulging."

Bill added that other parents must not live in a fantasy world and think their own teens won't be susceptible to such temptation.

"They know that kids are doing this, and there but for the grace of God goes theirs," he remarked.

As the holiday season approaches, Ryan's parents plead that other teens will be cautious as they make the Christmas and New Year's party circuit.

"Going through what we did, it is unbelievably frightening what can and does happen," Bill McKee said. "I wish, with all my heart, that kids understand the life they're holding in their hands when they do drink and drive."

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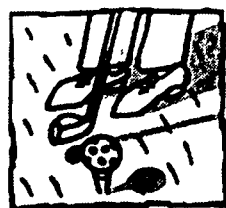
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