

Glazer: One life lost may save other teens on roads

Even though I never met Joshua Brown, I'm pretty sure I would have liked him. His pictures show a handsome young man with thick brown hair and a smile that inspires reciprocity. He was both an accomplished musician and a star athlete at Cartersville High, one of those rare kids who defies being pigeon-holed.

There are photos of him joking playfully with his mother and posing proudly with his father on prom night. From all appearances, he was just the sort of boy I'd pick as a date for one of the Glazer girls. If, of course, I lived in that alternate reality where I could choose my teenagers' boyfriends.

Joshua Brown died in July 2003 at the age of 17. Like approximately nine other American teenagers who die each day, he was killed in an automobile accident. He wasn't drinking. He wasn't speeding or driving recklessly. He simply hit a puddle on a rain slick road and hydroplaned into a tree.

Grief does different things to different people. Some are immobilized. Some find a haven in denial, refusing to even speak their lost child's name. Some can speak of nothing else. Some are angry. And some are moved to act.

That's what happened to LuGina and Alan Brown. They felt their only son's inexperience as a driver played a role in his death. They formed the Joshua Brown Foundation with the goal of ensuring that every high school student in Georgia has the opportunity to receive top-quality driver's education.

The Foundation worked with legislators to get Joshua's Law passed. It requires the collection of 5 percent from every traffic violation statewide to be distributed to schools for driver's education. The law states that if you are 16 years old, you must complete a driver education course approved by the Department of Driver Services in order to receive a Class D License.

Those individuals who don't complete an approved course must wait until they are 17 to become licensed. Drivers must also complete a cumulative total of at least 40 hours of other supervised driving experience, including at least six hours at night.

Our daughter, Rachel, will turn 15 on Aug. 22, a birth date she shares with Joshua Brown. Next week we plan to attend a two-hour seminar at Gainesville State College, where representatives of the Georgia Traffic Injury Prevention Institute will present a Teen and Parent Driving Program to get us ready for the hurdles ahead. There's a lot to wrap our heads around. I hope they provide us with a check list. We're going to need it.

I suppose there are people who consider these requirements an intrusion. I'm not one of them. I feel that any help I can get in preparing my child to take to the roads is more than welcome. I want to know that other young drivers are having to meet equally stringent guidelines.

If nine American kids died each day, every day, from swine flu or some other disease du jour, we'd be all over it. I don't understand why driving at 16 is treated as some sort of inalienable right like liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

Driving, especially these days, is often under increasingly unforgiving circumstances. There's very little margin for error. Ga. 400 at rush hour. Need I say more?

Driver's education gives kids a head start on developing the needed proficiencies. The graduated license requirements allow young drivers to grow into these skills without the initial distractions of passengers and the challenges of nighttime driving conditions.

I get a lump in my throat every time I pass one of those roadside crosses covered in artificial flowers. Many of them are in remembrance of some teenager who never made it home.

An "In Memoriam" page doesn't have to be standard in every high school yearbook. There's no way to know how many kids' lives have been saved by the work of the Browns and their supporters. The Fatality Analysis Reporting System shows a 20 percent decrease in Georgia teen fatalities between 2006 and 2007. That's quite an accomplishment.

LuGina and Alan, I am so sorry for your loss. The satisfaction you feel at the accomplishments of the Foundation must be bittersweet. There is a saying from the Talmud, the book of Jewish law, that reads: "Whoever saves a life, it is considered as if he saved an entire world."

I hope you find some solace in that.