

When a young person unexpectedly, it's up to parents, teachers and other adults to help make sure the scenario isn't replayed again.

One-hundred eighty vacant and teary eyes stared out looking for answers. There were none.

So they sat ... mostly in silence. Clinging to each other, 90 classmates were grieving over the loss of a special friend. His life ended in an instant of teenage misjudgment and the belief in invulnerability that is the hallmark of this age group. High school seniors, they celebrate new beginnings and anticipate their futures, as all who have preceded them have done ... and all who follow will surely do. This group of seniors and their loved ones were in pain. They were bewildered.

For many, this was the first loss that touched them directly — and it hurt. Would the impact, transmitted through pain and loss, go beyond the summer when new worlds would open up to them in college or first jobs?

Even as they breathed sighs of relief, the parents, as well as counselors, teachers and the principal at the gathering, struggled. What could they say? They offered prayers to try to provide comfort to the children and themselves. While some ventured into pleading for caution, others expressed anger and even desperation directed at the children who wanted so desperately to live as adults. They, too, grieved over the death of a unique young man and were pained for the family that was trying to cope with the loss.

Somehow for this group of high school graduates, tragedy seemingly had been avoided — until this point. We thought we had made it. We thought our kids were safe. Now the mothers and fathers longed for this senseless death to have meaning and to teach a lesson in hopes that such a cruel thing might never happen again. This was a faint hope, tempered by an unmistakable reminder of our fragility and powerlessness.

So what can be done to lessen the chance that this scenario will be replayed?

Teenagers will drink. Even sober, they will drive with abandon. They know what is wrong, yet they suspend their judgment. It takes only a moment of carelessness in a car going too fast, or a distraction caused by a cell phone or a companion, to create an opening for tragedy to enter. Sometimes the reckless act of another, whether adult or adolescent, causes a fatal accident. While changing such probabilities is indeed possible, the actions required are often uncomfortable and may not be well accepted.

First, parents must look to themselves. They have to acknowledge what type of role models they have been. How many times have they gotten into their cars after drinking? It is too common that a drunk adult fights with friends who try to take his or her keys or encourage them to get a ride home. Remorse for causing harm to another is small solace to someone injured when an inebriate drives up onto a sidewalk and maims an innocent bystander.

What is being demonstrated? Is irresponsibility the sole domain of adolescents?

Equally important, parents must take a stand with their teenagers by not condoning the use of drugs or alcohol. This message must be conveyed both by words and actions. There should be no parties where underage children are allowed to drink, even when the rationale is that they are being kept safe. As uncomfortable as it may be, parents must work together to prevent such stupidity.

Fathers and mothers should band together and urge others not to allow this to occur, even if they feel their children's popularity may be at stake.

When unnecessarily tragic events occur, life seems to come to a temporary halt. Promises are made with great intentions for future care: wisdom gained from a harsh lesson in reality. However, like the tide at the beach, the signs of today are washed away, and the world adjusts as if yesterday never occurred. Yet there are memories that can serve as the basis for life-altering change for all who have been touched. The hole is never adequately filled. Even decades later, those who have lost children mourn, trying to make sense, trying to go on. For the friends who may still be feeling the acute pain of loss, perhaps they can find some measure of comfort in knowing that the hurt will lessen as time passes and new experiences fill daily lives.

To pay tribute, it is up to those left behind to give some sense of meaning to this horrible situation, by acting bravely to handle peers who are behaving in ways that increase the chance of a bad outcome. Let those who are rational be in control. Don't let teenagers make foolish excuses. Help them continue on their path to adulthood with the reflection of their friend in their minds. Their tears will stop, and their eyes should fill with joy and wonder. In some way, each day will become a memorial, combining endless sadness with the resilience of spirit and faith that allows people to go on in spite of the scars. Let it not be a mere memory, but a true commitment to good ... and to giving a lost life real meaning.

* * * Hopefully, by the time this column is published, Michael Jackson will have been laid to rest, and the incessant drivel about the meaning of his contributions will be over. He wasted his life. It wasn't one bad choice that killed him but a lifetime of errors.

I do not know why so much time has been spent lauding him, when he modeled nothing about valuing life. On the other hand, when those who relished their lives are gone too soon, I feel especially infuriated.