

Arrive Alive Creative Contest

“What If?”

By Amelia F. Tacheny

Her name was Danielle “Dani” Ranger. Star field hockey player, junior firefighter, involved student, daughter, and friend. Dani radiated with life and beauty, reminding everyone how wonderful it is to be young. On October 15th, 2011 Dani’s phone rang as she drove away from a friend’s house. She answered it, “Sorry I’m running late---” Her friend heard a scream then the line cut short. Dani lost control of her Pontiac Sunfire, and spun sideways into a small tree. This beautiful and talented sixteen year old lost her life the next day.

Her death has left open wounds on our small community, wounds that have not healed. Dirigo High School wrapped itself in grief and found solace in one another’s arms. The student body of around three hundred were numb with the pain of having lost her. We cried at her candlelight, said goodbye at her funeral, and months later, still have scars and hurt, forever asking, “What if?”

What if she hadn’t sped? What if she had left the house later? What if she hadn’t reached down to pick up the phone? What if..? Her death affected each of us differently. For me, it was guilt. I felt guilty for being alive, not coming to terms with her death. I didn’t understand why this young lady, who was so accomplished, died. I had gotten my license at the same time, I sped, and I had often answered my phone. I keep thinking back to all these moments and keep wondering, why?

A day after her funeral, my cross country team ran at the Maine State Regionals for Class

C. With feathers in our hair in honor of her, our six girls huddled together as our coach pulled out a T-shirt with “Run for Dani” on it. “Run as if it’s your last race, leave everything out there on the course. Don’t cross the finish line thinking you could have given more and regret it later. Run with no regrets.” Our team started the race crying. For the first time in the season, four of us crossed the finish line seconds apart. Dirigo’s small team, exhausted and crying, blindly hugged one another in our pain with our coach holding us up saying, “She is so proud of you.” Dirigo, for the first time in years, had made it to States as a team, as a family, with Dani running with us.

Dani’s death has reminded us all how short life really is and has made everyone drive a little slower and put down the phones. The small and close-knit community of Dixfield, where the kids have known each other since kindergarten, has come together in the hopes of never having to lose a young and vibrant student again. Parents now tell their children to be safe as they drive away. Hugs are longer before departure. Phone calls go unanswered. Whenever someone calls me, they always ask if I’m driving before continuing on with the conversation.

This should have happened long before we lost Dani. The pain of losing a classmate in a school is something no student body should ever have to experience. A mother should never have to bury a child. The campaign against drunk and distracted driving should be shouted in school hallways, displayed across the internet, and be a regular family discussion. Schools should take a direct stand, with the student body leading the way. Dirigo often quotes, “For Dani...” at school events, both sports and academic. So now I say, “For Dani...” I will campaign against losing another student, athlete, or friend to distracted driving with the hope of saving the lives of young drivers, all drivers and this driver.