

ON A MISSION TO SAVE LIVES

Parents honor son killed by drunken driver as Roux Foundation aims to prevent another tragedy



The second annual Luke Roux Memorial Game was held at the Avon Old Farms ice rink on Wednesday. Taylor Hartz/Hartford Courant
BY TAYLOR HARTZ HARTFORD COURANT

When Luke Roux and his brothers were young, their parents built a homemade ice rink in their yard and the three boys sped around on their skates chasing a hockey puck.

For the rest of Luke's life, hockey was a pillar of his personality and his relationships. It strengthened his bond with his father, Steve Roux, and solidified lifelong friendships with his teammates.

On Wednesday night, Roux's family and friends packed the stands at Jennings Fairchild Ice Rink at Avon Old Farms School, gathering around the ice for Luke once more. But instead of watching Luke play, they attended an annual hockey game in honor of his memory. Luke, 17, was killed by a drunken driver just 10 days after graduating from Farmington High School in June 2022.

The teen was headed home from a summer baseball game on June 25, 2022, when then-21-year-old Jacob Coffey, heading home from a concert at the Xfinity Theatre, sped through a red light in his Jeep and struck Roux at the intersection of the Colt Highway and Birdseye Road in Farmington.

His parents, Steve and Carri Roux, are forced to drive through that intersection often, bringing the memory of the worst night of their lives barreling back.

Each time he drives through that spot, Steve remembers teaching Luke to drive on those streets. He can still picture Luke at the wheel as he sat in the passenger seat, warning him about the traffic in that intersection, never imagining that a car would speed through a red light and end his son's life.

Steve and Carri Roux have made it their mission to prevent other families from experiencing the life-altering pain they have felt since that summer night. They are no longer able to parent their youngest son, but they are now "parenting his legacy," they said.

The Rouxs, who run the Luke Roux Memorial Fund, are launching the new Luke Roux Memorial Foundation that will aim to prevent and eventually eliminate similar tragedies.

Their goals for the new foundation are big, they said, because the pain they are left with is bigger.

"It's something that's not describable," Steve Roux said. "It's as bad as you think it is and it's 100 times worse than anything I could imagine."

More than don't drink and drive: Despite their crippling grief, just a week after Luke's death, the Roux and their support system organized the Luke Roux Memorial Fund.

Through it they have awarded scholarships to local athletes, organized the memorial game with the Farmington Valley Generals and worked on educational initiatives and community outreach campaigns that spread two messages: Be kind to one another and never drive drunk.

The Rouxs are aware that the message “don’t drink and drive” is one almost everyone has heard. It’s a phrase, they think, that has almost lost its meaning.

“It doesn’t seem to be working, we’ve been saying that for 20-plus years,” said Steve Roux.

Their goal is to spread a new message. “It’s not just don’t drink and drive, it’s don’t drink if you have any chance that you might have to drive. That’s the message that I hope continues to resonate with people,” said Steve Roux.

“You have to make the decisions ahead of time. You’re going to put yourself in a difficult spot if you are trying to make those decisions after you’ve been drinking.”

Their son’s life was taken, they said, because Coffey did not plan ahead. The tragedy could have been avoided, they believe, if he had taken a ride-share to the concert venue or had a loved one drop him off.

“Whatever time he started drinking that day was when the problem started,” said Steve Roux.

Their goal, the Rouxs told the Courant, is to make sure people understand the responsibility they have to avoid impaired decision-making and intoxicated driving every time they drink.

On a mission: The mission statement of the new Luke Roux Memorial Foundation is to reduce fatalities caused by intoxicated driving today and eliminate them tomorrow. The foundation will be focused on increasing awareness about the risks of drunken driving and options for safe alternatives, lobbying for public policy changes and investing in technologies that can reduce motor vehicle collisions.

The educational component will focus on encouraging drivers of all ages, or even future drivers, to have conversations with their friends about responsible planning and the potential repercussions if they don’t have plans in place.

They hope to continue making local schools aware of educational resources that are available about drunken driving and hopefully reach more drivers with Luke’s story.

Then, they hope to bring local and state-level governments together with Connecticut-based corporations and organizations to start or keep the conversation going about what policies can be changed or enacted to keep the roads safer.

The Rouxs said that one of the things that has been most challenging for them since Luke's death is the stark contrast between Coffey's actions and their son's moral convictions.

"One of the things that's so difficult in our grief process is that Luke was very much a rule follower," said Steve Roux. "He was taken by someone who was ignoring every rule."

Records show that Coffey had a blood alcohol level of 0.23 and was driving nearly twice the speed limit when he drove through the red light.

Luke, they said, would have had a hard time even wrapping his head around those actions. "He would get angry when people didn't follow the rules," they said.

"He did his own thing, he wasn't influenced by any peer pressure, I don't think that's something he would understand," Carri Roux said.

"If he didn't want to do something, or didn't think it was right, he would just say no," Steve Roux said. "It was a superpower."

Luke's legacy: After his death, a teacher told Carri Roux that Luke made everyone he met feel comfortable in his presence, something she said she would always remember.

Luke had a deep love of music that rivaled his passion for sports, having played baseball since he was 5 and hockey for even longer. He was making friends all over the world, his mom said, through playing with an online band. And he was exploring a love of progressive rock music. The more complex and orchestral the music was, the more Luke loved trying to understand it, his dad said.

Luke was set to head off to college at the University of Connecticut, where he planned to continue to invest in his many passions. At Coffey's sentencing, friends and family shared how they felt they were robbed of a future with Luke.

Ryan Jainchill, who was best friends with Luke since before they could speak, was home in Connecticut this holiday season after finishing his first semester of college. Instead of visiting with his lifelong neighbor, he kicked off the memorial game held in Luke's honor. He opened the game by sharing a message from Luke's family and reminding the spectators who filled the stands why they were there.

"I want it to be preached how avoidable it is and how that guy's decision impacted all of us," he said, gesturing toward the full hockey rink. "My life, the Roux's lives and the lives of anyone who knew Luke at any point in their life."

Though Jainchill remembers Luke as a man of few words, Jainchill said Luke's energy always made an impact on their friends and teammates.

"I knew him for 17 years of my life and he was just a stand-up guy. He was never the most vocal, probably the least vocal of any team I've been on, but he didn't really have to speak for his presence to be known."

And his presence was part of Jainchill's life from before he can remember. The first time Jainchill played hockey was beside Luke in their backyard rink. That, combined with many shared rides to different hockey games and practices, gave them a unique connection.

"It's kind of cliché for hockey but him and I always just kind of found each other on the ice," he said. "Him and I always just connected on passes. We always kind of had that sense of where one another was on the ice and there's so many moments in the ice where that connection him and I had led to a goal."

Though Luke is no longer here to connect on those passes, his presence is still a part of Jainchill's life. Jainchill, a freshman at George Washington University, is studying to become a sports broadcaster, a passion he credits to Luke.

"His influence that first time I skated with him has propelled me to where I am in life," he said.

Part of Luke's legacy is continuing to fuel that love of hockey. At a recent game between West Hartford's Hall High School and Conard High School, the Rouxs honored Blake Ittleson, goalie for Conard High School, with the second annual Luke Roux Memorial Scholarship.

The goal of that award, the Rouxs said, is to recognize "the player that is the most like Luke. The quiet leader, the player that just always shows up and works hard."

A lasting kindness: In addition to being a reliable teammate on and off the ice or field, Luke's parents said they have heard one sentiment echoed over and over about their son: Luke truly was always kind.

So when Luke's birthday came around this year, the memorial fund launched a campaign to promote random acts of kindness. Carri Roux carries around a stack of "kindness cards," small cards with Luke's name and photo, paired with a simple question: "How did you spread kindness today?"

The fund encourages people to do little selfless acts like buying someone coffee or chocolate or dropping off smoothies when they are sick or hurt.

With another kind of card, they ensured safe rides to this year's graduates of Farmington High School, handing out ride-share vouchers.

All of these efforts, the Rouxs said, are an attempt to save even one life. To save even one family from suffering the same loss. To keep their son's legacy alive, when he is not.

For Steve Roux, it's not yet clear whether their work is brightening the darkness of the loss.

“For me, that question has yet to be answered. We're still in the deep, deep grief stage of this,” he said. “We're going to be grieving this for the rest of our lives. And there's days that are much tougher than others, but it is a way to move forward in that grief.”

For Carri Roux, the fund and the new foundation, “give a little purpose to all this pain.”