

THE ACCIDENT THAT BROKE TOLEDO'S HEART

City Council candidate Joe McNamara finds campaign trail paved with memories of his father

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Joe McNamara was only 6, but he remembers it vividly — the day a wheel came off an oncoming car and crashed through the windshield of his dad's Renault, smashing into his father's head.

He can still put himself there on that day 23 years ago, twice calling out for his father and getting no response.

"That's when I saw all of this blood everywhere," Mr. McNamara said. "It was just pouring, pouring out of him like a waterfall."

The freak accident on Dec. 4, 1983, snuffed out the life of a rising political star — Dan McNamara, the Lucas County auditor at the time — but left his young son in the passenger seat unharmed.

Now, that boy has grown up and is campaigning for a seat on Toledo City Council, facing the specter of his father's death on a daily basis.

Strangers ask if he's Dan's son. Some bring up the high-profile accident, wondering if he was the little boy in the car.

"I get asked about it all the time," Mr. McNamara said.

Until his decision to run for City Council, the accident that stung Toledoans so many years ago was mostly forgotten.

And even though Joe McNamara says he's put the tragedy behind him, he was unable to visit the site of his father's crash last week with a *Blade* photographer after earlier agreeing to do so.

"We were going to go to the overpass, but that was just too tough, I couldn't do it," he said in an e-mail to *The Blade*.

Personal tragedies are always horrific, no matter who suffers them. For politicians campaigning for office, though, the next reminder of it could be just a handshake away. All day. Every day.

Mr. McNamara isn't alone in how public his trauma has become.

Before the last presidential campaign, the majority of Americans didn't know that the oldest child of Democratic contender John Edwards died in a car crash at the age of 16.

Closer to home, both of Ohio's U.S. senators, Mike DeWine and George Voinovich, lost daughters to traffic accidents.

These events can resurface to varying degrees. In some ways, it helps that politicians tend to be people with built-in defense mechanisms, said Richard Ned Lebow, a professor of government at Dartmouth College who specializes in political psychology.

"People with thin skins for the most part don't become politicians. Most of them, they're very well protected."

For Mr. McNamara, a lawyer from West Toledo, it's not like the sensitive inquiries have been unexpected. The son of a prominent Republican politician, he's been telling people about his father's death all his life — just not as



A family snapshot captures a young Joe McNamara spending time with his father, Dan.

frequently and randomly to strangers.

A well-adjusted life

Mr. McNamara's parents were divorced at the time of the accident. His 37-year-old father, a former city councilman who was considering a run for Congress, was taking him to see a movie at Southwyck Shopping Center.

As they traveled south on Reynolds Road, a tire came off a northbound car and struck the McNamara car, causing it to ram into the concrete abutment of a railroad overpass near Angola Road. The car was so mangled that 6-year-old Joe McNamara had to roll down a window and climb out to escape.

That vision did not soon leave him.

"I would just be trying to sleep, or playing, or whatever 6-year-olds do, and I'd have a flashback and I'd see the [gore]," he said in a recent interview.

As a youngster, he spent about six months visiting a series of therapists. A deeply religious and mature child, Mr. McNamara said he eventually adjusted to the trauma. One day, he told his mother, Jill Kelly, that he didn't need therapy any more.

"I said, 'Mom, I know you're sending me to these people because you're trying to help me, but you helped me more than they ever could. I don't think I need to see them any more, but if I do, I'll let you know.'"

What helped the most - and what made the visions go away, he said - was his mother's suggestion that he think of the good times, like when father and son would play in leaf piles they made.

By all accounts, Mr. McNamara has gone on to a well-adjusted life. He graduated from the University of Michigan with honors, majoring in English, and received a law degree from New York University before returning to his hometown.

He didn't linger on the tragedy (or a later, slower one that occurred when his stepfather, Mike Ordway, died of cancer when he was in high school).

"When something bad in your life happens, you have to deal with it," said Mr. McNamara, who attends Christ the King Church. "But after you've dealt with it, you have to move on."

Of course, some things are different. His father's death led him to become closer to his uncles and grandfather growing up. And he still gets somber on Father's Day.

It's not like he avoids driving on Reynolds Road near the accident site, but there are some things he'd rather not dwell on.

"There are a lot of details of the accident that I purposely don't like to think about or remember, like the name of the woman who was driving the car," he said. "What I don't know I don't really want to remember."

Antoinette Gillen, 42, who was driving a 10-year-old Chevrolet Impala with loose lug nuts, was cited for misdemeanor charges of driving an unsafe vehicle and failure to display a license plate. She was convicted of the charges but received a suspended sentence.

Now, in the midst of a campaign to fill Bob McCloskey's seat on City Council, Mr. McNamara — who is running as a Democrat — thinks about his father all the time.

"Because I get asked about it so much," he said.

Mr. McNamara is running against endorsed Democrat Lourdes Santiago, who holds the seat by appointment; endorsed Republican David Schulz; Democrats Bob Vasquez and James Mohn, and Republican David Davison.

Moving forward

The accident isn't likely to go away if Mr. McNamara is in future political races, if the experiences of Senator DeWine are any indicator.

Mr. DeWine lost his daughter Becky in 1993 when he was lieutenant governor and making a bid for the U.S. Senate. She was 22 and working at the Xenia Daily Gazette when her car slid left of center on a rain-slicked road and slammed into a pickup truck.

Her father learned of the accident while he was campaigning in Akron. He stopped everything for several weeks before his children convinced him that Becky, who was with Mr. DeWine and his wife, Fran, at a campaign event the weekend before her death, would have wanted him to go for it.

Now, 13 years later as he runs for re-election against challenger U.S. Rep. Sherrod Brown (D., Avon), people still bring it up. Sometimes, by parents who also have lost a child.

For the senator, it has become a positive reminder of a life that was lost at a young age but well-lived.

"When you lose a child, you want your child to be remembered," he said. "It's a very, very nice thing.

"Some people think, 'I shouldn't mention your child because that might bring back bad memories,' " he continued. "I think of her every day. It's a very nice thing when they do it. It shows that they're very considerate."

If anyone can relate to the DeWines, it is Mr. Voinovich. In 1979, when he was in the middle of a race for mayor of Cleveland, his 9-year-old daughter Molly was struck and killed by a van that ran a red light.

"It was a very difficult time," he said. "We put the campaign in limbo."

Ultimately, he continued the race, but it was something with which everyone in his family struggled, including his three remaining children. He said it's important for people who lose a child to get professional help for the siblings.

"We didn't do it," Senator Voinovich said. "People should do it."

People may respond to this kind of trauma in a variety of ways — shock, sadness, rage, hopelessness — and it varies how quickly they may bounce back, said Dr. John Krystal, a professor of psychiatry at Yale University.

"I don't think there's a universal prescription," he said. "Some will recover on their own and not even need support. The place where mental-health professionals come in around these situations is [helping] people to deal with persisting discomfort or distress on the one hand or problems that are interfering with their ability to carry on their daily functions."

Mr. Voinovich, who said he threw himself into his work, said he can see how his daughter's death changed him.

"When you lose a child, you have a stroke. You do," he said. "You become a lot more sensitive. Your eyes, you have different eyes. You see things differently than you did before."

Mr. Voinovich said not many people bring up his daughter's death, but it did come up recently with one woman.

"She said, 'I remember when you lost your daughter because I was in the same grade as she was. We had to write a paper about her passing away.' You get those kinds of things," Mr. Voinovich said.

Strong reminders

Mr. McNamara has his own strong reminders these days.

His campaign is largely self-financed through the money he received from his father's estate, the same money that paid for school and his house.

And every day he stumps for office is an echo of his father's legacy.

"I know that he has always wanted to follow in the footsteps of his dad," said his mother, Ms. Kelly, who is director of the Lucas County Board of Elections.

There are some differences — Mr. McNamara said he's been a Democrat since he was old enough to vote, instead of a Republican like his father — but the candidate acknowledged he'd like to emulate the vision he has of his father, a man who loved Toledo and wanted to make its people better through public service.

"The fact that I come from this line, I didn't want to throw the opportunity away," he said.

His father was a popular political figure who had knocked off a longtime incumbent to become auditor, said current Lucas County Auditor Larry Kaczala, who worked with Mr. McNamara in the auditor's office back then.

Mr. Kaczala said Dan McNamara's funeral at Gesu Parish ended with one last standing ovation and round of applause.

"Democrats who had so long lived with Mr. McNamara as a sharp Republican thorn in their sides had red-rimmed eyes. They took communion with the rest of the mourners," The Blade wrote of the funeral service.

"He loved what he was doing. Politics, to him, was a noble calling," David Lewandowski, one of his assistants and now a county judge, told the many mourners.

Campaign connection

Retired Ohio Supreme Court Justice Andy Douglas has watched the professional growth of both father and son. He knew the McNamaras well, since the days he served on Toledo City Council with Dan McNamara in the 1970s. Years later, Joe McNamara served as his intern at the Supreme Court, and they would sometimes talk of Dan.

"I think he has made his peace with that and, as best as anybody can, moved on," he said. "I've seen the opposite happen to many of us over the years."

Still, there remain good memories to think back upon.

Back when he was a kid, Mr. McNamara would accompany his father as he campaigned. They even had a schtick. The father would start talking to someone, often a grandmotherly-type, when his little boy would interrupt and take over.

Now, even though Dan McNamara is gone, father and son remain connected by this campaign. Mr. McNamara feels it as he marches toward Election Day, just like his dad did years before.

"I wish he were here," he said. "He went through what I'm going through."

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