

February 1, 2016

The hardest part of writing my annual Matt Update is getting started. So much exciting stuff has happened this past year but because it is this time of year I am on an emotional roller coaster. Especially this year because what I have been working on the last couple of months is forcing me to re-live the day Matt was killed over, and over, and over again.

As I talk with other parents in my same situation I continue to learn how normal my state of mind is, and that I am not the only one that has no control of where it goes when it comes to reliving my grief. I'm normal, YAY!!! Some may beg to differ, lol.

Even with all the exciting things that have happened this past year it has been particularly hard to write this year's Matt Update. It still amazes me that it can be eleven years since we lost Matt and my heart can still ache like it was yesterday. In the blink of an eye I can be transported back to that very morning and feel that excruciating pain of losing him all over again. I was sharing with a friend how difficult it has been but that I didn't have time right now to grieve because I have too much to do, and that pain is so debilitating that when I feel it coming I have to say out loud, "not now Matt, not now, I'm sorry I will mourn your passing, just not now." I then remarked, I have become a seasoned griever.... not something I would wish upon anyone. I love and miss Matt so much. I know my grieving day is going to be a rough one (hopefully only one), but I will be okay, I will just have to ride it out.

I remember meeting an older woman a year after Matt was killed while trying to get support for Matt's Law. As we walked out of the building together she stopped me and said, "I am so sorry for your loss, it has been 25 years since I lost my son, and it's still hard." I cried for her and me that night as I cried myself to sleep every night back then.

Now, for what you've all been waiting for, all the wonderful and exciting things that have happened since my last update. When I left off we were preparing to launch the AHA! Movement in Chico on the 10th anniversary of Matt's death. And so we did, and it was awesome! We were there for two days and as always we were very well received in Chico, but one of my favorite parts was everyone that participated in our candlelight vigil right from their own homes throughout the country. Lighting your candles and putting them on my Facebook page was so touching. Words cannot express how moved I was and how wonderful it felt; I could literally feel the love and support. I hope we will continue this each and every year....

So, as we had hoped, AHA! has been getting into the high schools and colleges, only at a slower pace than we had anticipated. I set pretty high standards and goals for myself so I always expect more but when I look back and see what all we have accomplished in our first year I am astounded at how far we have come since our inception. I can see and feel the difference we are making and it feels wonderful. Our greatest presentation to date was last September when we went to San Marcos State University and spoke to almost 500 students. It was an amazing experience and the feedback from our survey was everything we could have hoped for. Matt is making a difference!!! We have various speaking engagements with organizations, clubs, parents and schools, and are always looking for more, so if you can help us in anyway please let me know.

The BIGGEST news was accomplishing one of the hardest things I have ever done. Getting AHA!'s 501(c)3 status approved by the IRS!!! YES, if you haven't seen the "Shout Heard Round Facebook", **we are a 501(c)3 Non-Profit Organization**. YAY!!! Super excited about this news. So if you are looking for a worthy cause to make a "tax deductible" donation we welcome you with open arms. You can click here and follow the instructions. <http://www.gofundme.com/kw5bf4>

On a personal note, some MORE exciting news, I'm writing a book. For years people have been asking me "Debbie when are you going to write a book?" And my answer is, NOW, lol. I feel I have more than one book in me with everything I have learned and experienced on my eleven-year journey but what is important to me with this particular book is to bring HOPE. I would like to share how even when you are in the deepest darkest

depths of hell believing you will be there forever because going on without your child is unimaginable, one day, in time, you will come out of the darkness. How one day you will smile again, one day you will laugh again, one day you can be happy without guilt. It doesn't happen overnight, and it is not an easy journey, but knowing that it is possible is half the battle. I want to give you hope where there is no hope that one day you can and will be okay. This will be a book of love, hope, forgiveness and survival, and how if you put your mind to it and believe ANYTHING IS POSSIBLE.

This year on the anniversary of Matt's death, tomorrow, February 2nd, we are not going to Chico but rather opening our home to friends, family, supporters and anyone who would like to remember or get to know Matt. You will determine the size of the crowd. You are welcome to come by anytime after 5:30pm; around 7pm we will be showing Matt's power point presentation sharing his wonderful life and the difference he has made. There will be appetizers and beverages, and we will also celebrate AHA!'s one year anniversary. We look forward to seeing all those who are able to make it.

Since we will not be in Chico this year, I hope that those of you in Chico will remember Matt there. Maybe someone could go by and leave a candle or flowers in front of the frat house where he was killed at the corner of 4th and Chestnut, now the Rohr Chabad Jewish Center.

To learn more about my book and how to get a copy please follow this link... <http://igg.me/at/FaoOkgOENpo>

Thank you for remembering Matt in your prayers and your amazing support throughout the years. If you think of it please light a candle in remembrance tomorrow night, February 2nd.

If you would like to contact me for any reason, please feel free to reply to this email, you can call or text me at 209-470-7116 or message me on Facebook. www.facebook.com/debbiesmithmm

Please remember life is short and memories are precious. Time goes by too fast; in the blink of an eye...don't miss out. MAKE MEMORIES!!! And when you are feeling down, remember the good things in your life and be thankful you have them, life is a blessing.

"Hug your children and tell them you love them EVERY DAY!"

God Bless....

Love and Smiles,

Debbie, MM