



Thomas Allen Schlapman was killed on 11/21/2012 by a drunk driver. He left behind a Wife and a 9-year old Daughter, Rachel.

On 11/20, Allen, Rachel, and Allen's Mother arrived at the home of his Brother and Sister-in-Law, Stephen & Kimberly Schlapman, for a family Thanksgiving celebration. That evening, Stephen & Allen walked around the property and talked about landscaping, water run-off, and trees. Allen stopped at a dogwood tree and talked at length about how much he loved dogwoods.

On 11/21 around 3pm, Allen left Stephen's home on a motorcycle and rode to an antique store in Franklin, TN. On his way back, Allen was struck head-on and killed instantly by a car driven by a highly intoxicated man (who is now in prison).

That night, Stephen drove Allen's truck with their Mother and Rachel to Lynchburg Virginia so that Rachel could be in her Mother's arms as quickly as possible; Stephen's Wife and Daughter drove to Lynchburg the next day, Thanksgiving Day for most of America.

While in Lynchburg, Stephen's Wife got a message from a friend whose family wanted to do something for their friends who had just lost their Brother and Daisy's Uncle. They had ordered a tree for them to plant in their yard in his memory, a dogwood tree. They had never met Allen and had no way of knowing how much he loved dogwood trees.

Allen was buried on 11/27/2012; no one who hasn't buried their Father at 9-years-old can imagine how hard that must have been for Rachel. When she returned home from her Daddy's funeral she was standing in her driveway with a group of relatives when a florist truck pulled up. She went to the truck to pick up the flowers to take to her Mommy. While walking to her house she noticed the card had her name on it. Someone cared enough to send flowers to HER! Mommy got flowers, the family got flowers, and now SHE had received flowers! That small gesture helped her know that someone cared about her, that she is special and important, and it helped her start moving forward in her new life. Every child who loses a loved one should get something special as they start their journey to deal with their grief and their "new normal".

I am Stephen Schlapman. My father lost his father when he was 2 years old. My best friend had a son (with whom I share a birthday) who lost his daddy at 2 years old in 2004. I had many close relatives and friends die when I was a child and I remember sitting off to the side while the adults made arrangements, comforted each other, and grieved. I remember having no one to talk to about what I was experiencing. I know it's easy for adults to think children are resilient and will get over this loss quickly "if they even realize what's going on". Kids DO realize what's going on, kids DO have feelings that they need to talk about, kids NEED to be comforted, kids NEED to grieve; but kids have few opportunities to talk to anyone about their feelings as the adults are busy and it's unlikely that there are other kids around who have previously experienced a loss similar to what that child is going through. Kids will not begin to adjust to this new normal until they have an outlet for their thoughts, feelings, and grief. This is why I've started The Dogwood Project.

The mission of The Dogwood Project (TDP) is to help kids who lose a close relative as they go through the grieving process by giving them opportunities to talk. We will send the youngest children a teddy bear and we will send children 5-12 a young dogwood tree as a “living memorial” to plant with a trusted adult as a way for conversation to begin. We will also help the child’s care-giver find a local Grief Counselor for the child; preferably low- or no-cost counseling.

TDP will initially focus on children from Tennessee while we set up all of the necessary functions. Once the systems are in place, we will expand to serve children regionally and nationally. We will also initially limit our service to children who have lost a parent (or the child’s primary care-giver) with the goal of expanding to siblings and more distant relatives.

TDP has agreements with a local grief counseling agency and a Dogwood tree supplier; additionally, we have The Dogwood Project Teddy-Bears. We respect the privacy of the children we serve; we ask local schools, churches, funeral homes, etc. to let us know of children we could serve by telling us only the name of the deceased, the age(s) of their child/children, and the name of the community where they live (for grief counseling recommendations). We will have the tree or teddy-bear along with a card delivered to the information-supplier who can make the delivery at the appropriate time. TDP will cover the cost of the tree or teddy-bear.

As TDP grows, we hope to partner with a national civic organization whose local chapters will be able to administer the program in communities across America.

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For more information, please visit The Dogwood Project website (www.thedogwoodproject.org).

The Dogwood Project and The Dogwood Fund are administered by The Community Foundation of Middle Tennessee, a 501(c)(3): 615-321-4939

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