

AUGUST 2016

PRESS RELEASE

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Teen Death on the Farm – A Tragic Reality

Can the death of a 15-year-old help raise awareness of the need for farm safety? His mother hopes so.

Michael Steele had a lot of dreams: earning enough to buy a 2002 blue Dodge Ram pickup with a Cummins diesel engine and custom modifications like chromed exhaust pipes that curved up from the side of the truck cab and giant wheels; completing a diesel mechanics program at a vocational school; and living out his life in his home town of Frankford, Missouri.

But Michael, sometimes referred to as Bubba by his friends, didn't have time to see any of those dreams materialize. July 1, 2013, at the age of 15, he lost his life in a tragic accident while he was working with a 17-year old friend, Matthew McGlasson.

Michael had started working when he was 13, chopping wood, selling his garden vegetables and hauling hay for local farmers. His mother, Dena Steele, said he often turned down opportunities to spend time with friends in order to earn some money.

"He went from playing video games 24/7 to working all the time," Dena says. "Even when one of his friends or his girlfriend wanted to hang out, he told them he had to work."

Michael and Matthew wanted to earn some money moving hay bales for a horse farmer, a cousin of Michael's grandfather. Confident that he could handle the 1954 International Harvester tractor, Michael eagerly climbed into the tractor seat. It was the same model tractor his grandfather had used when he taught Michael to drive a tractor. Behind it he pulled a 10- to 15-foot flatbed trailer that would soon be loaded with the hay bales.

The gravel road the boys were traveling on wasn't rough or dotted with potholes, but somehow, Michael lost his balance.

No one will ever know for certain what caused Michael to bounce out of the tractor seat. Matthew, sitting on the flatbed, had his back turned to Michael when it all happened. Matthew heard Michael yell and turned to see him hanging onto the back of the tractor seat. By the time Matthew stood up, Michael let go of the seat and fell to the ground. He landed on the roadway to the left of the tractor.

For a crucial moment, the tractor was driverless. Even though Matthew quickly scrambled along the trailer and up onto the tractor to stop it, the left wheels and axle of the flatbed ran right on top of Michael, causing severe brain trauma. Michael died instantly.

Dena and Michael's father (from Mexico) were devastated. His sister Nicole and grandparents Dale and Donna Cragen and Elizabeth Ebers as well as all of Michael's friends and acquaintances were stunned at what had happened. Michael had plans to join the Reserve Officers Training Corps (ROTC) and attend WyoTech vocational school. His favorite hobby was shooting sports and he was an expert sharpshooter with both guns and archery.

"He loved the Duck Dynasty show," Dena says. "He often wore Duck Dynasty t-shirts with the sleeves cut off and he loved camouflage clothing. He was always telling jokes and making people laugh. He loved to talk to people, whether he knew them or not."

It's hard for Dena and Michael's family to realize that a seat belt on the tractor Michael was driving could have saved his life. As a result of Michael's death, they have become advocates of tractor safety and safety on the job in general.

"He had been driving tractors for two years," Dena says. "He was often hired to haul hay and also had his own business cutting and splitting firewood to sell. He had several regular wood buying customers."

Dena wants to make it clear that she and her family don't blame Matthew in any way for what happened to Michael. They know he was just as devastated by the accident.

Before Michael's accident, Dena and her family didn't give much thought to tractor safety. Now, Dena hopes that parents and their children will take tractor safety and workplace safety in general very seriously.

Nationwide Insurance Professor of Agricultural Safety and Health and Extension Safety Specialist Dr. Dennis Murphy at Penn State's Department of Agricultural and Biological Engineering knows simple precautions can greatly reduce the incidence of death and tractor accidents.

“Some tractors, like the one Michael was driving, are too old to be retrofitted with safety options like a roll over protective structure (ROPS) or even a seatbelt,” Murphy says. “All tractors manufactured before 1968 are too old for these safety features. Farmers might want to consider retiring these really old tractors, especially if they’re going to be operated by youth who lack a wide range of operating experiences.”

Murphy stresses that tractor safety training is widely available and – especially for youth – can help reduce accidents and injury. Tractor safety training events are available through Extension offices across the nation. Numerous tractor safety online resources are also available, including www.extension.psu.edu and the National Agricultural Tractor Safety Initiative at www.nasdonline.org.

To honor Michael’s memory, Dena has established a Facebook page where others can post information about teens who lost their lives in farm-related accidents at <https://www.facebook.com/teenfarmaccidents/>. She has posted videos at <https://www.facebook.com/Michaels-Memorial-Videos-595751857161113/> and has posted Michael’s story on the United Support and Memorial for Workplace Fatalities (USMWF) site. She hopes that Michael’s death will cause others to look at their own work conditions and make sure they’re doing all they can to stay safe.

“What I’d like to see most is a requirement that all tractors that can be retrofitted have seat belts and roll over protective structures (ROPS),” Dena says. “I think it’s also important to have stricter laws regarding minors driving farm equipment. I would certainly hope that no other family has to suffer such horrendous loss and trauma.

“What do I miss about Michael the most? Everything!” Dena adds. “I hope people remember his sense of humor and genuine love of life. He was loyal to his friends, and his girl friend Kenady was the love of his life. His smile and beautiful brown eyes could melt anyone’s heart. It would help us so much if we saw something good come out of Michael’s death.”

Additional information about tractor and agricultural safety is available at <http://extension.psu.edu/business/ag-safety>.