Inside Front & Back Covers: A Promise to Adam

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A Promise to Adam
Kevin Paul DuPont
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Those of us who have more than we need, and those of us with something less, are asked regularly to sign on to something. It’s very much part of the American way, all the more because of the Internet, with all of us now so easily reached, connected, offered entrance into our friends’ lives and causes, joys and sorrows.

A neighbor is walking to raise money for breast cancer and asks us to pledge maybe 5, 10, or 15 cents a mile. Our church is sending its youth group out of state for charity work, so before we leave Sunday’s service, we sign the clipboard to assure them they can count on our $25. The office, reminding us to be good citizens all, partners with the United Way and our e-mails ding with the reminder to give what we can. A fellow Red Sox fan with an ailing child at Dana-Farber mentions the Jimmy Fund and we say, “Tell me where to send the check.”

Howard London and Barbara Spivak aren’t asking you for a penny. They want you, they need you, perhaps more than they’ve wanted or needed anything or anyone in their lives. They’d like you and your friends, your kids, your nephews, your half-cousins, your girlfriend’s boyfriend, your stepbrother’s best buddy, anyone and everyone to sign on to the short list of obligations they call “A Promise to Adam.” Pay nothing upfront. Pay nothing ever.

Just keep in mind what happened to their son, Adam London.

Especially if you are a high schooler, Adam’s grief-stricken parents would like you to think of Adam as your “BFFL” whenever you are in a car. Adam is no longer here to share your love and friendship, his life brought to an end in an instant, at 9:46 p.m. on Aug. 23, the fatal consequence of his speeding a car down a wet, winding, hilly Newton street on his way to a party. The crash site was about one mile from his home. The party he never made it to was only one more mile away.

About to enter his senior year at Newton North High School as the varsity lacrosse team’s stellar goalie, Adam only minutes earlier left his family’s home on Blake Street when he lost control of his 2003 Honda Civic. He was not wearing a seatbelt. He was racing down Bellevue Street at a speed upward of 60 m.p.h, based on what the police have told his mother, on a night when an experienced, prudent driver would have poked along at 20-25.

“A 17-year-old with a 17-year-old’s brain,” lamented Howard London, 63, the Provost and Vice President of Academic Affairs at Bridgewater State. “He thought he was invincible, not unlike most 17-year-olds who believe the same thing, I suppose.”

“Driving too fast was something Adam’s dad cautioned him about routinely during the 5-6 weeks Adam owned his driver’s license. His dad worried that the message wasn’t getting through, but Adam nonchalantly assured his father he was listening.

“You know, I think he did hear me,” said his dad, “but like I say . . . invincible. He didn’t think it could happen to him.”

Adam’s mother, Dr. Barbara Spivak, is an internist and the head of the Mount Auburn Cambridge Independent Practice Association. Like Howard, her ex-husband, she reminded her youngest son over and over to mind the speed limits.

“Was it enough to take the car keys away? No, it wasn’t,” she said. “Do I wish that I had taken the keys away? Yes.”

Parents know the struggle inherent in that kind of decision. We want our children to grow, thrive, learn, make their way in life. For that to happen, they need to do for themselves, and we hope their mistakes are minor, tiny slips of judgment that translate nicely into teachable moments. We cautiously set them free, all the while silently praying that the day never comes that the phone rings and we are told it’s best we get to the emergency room immediately.

“I worried about his speeding, I did,” said Spivak. “Adam was a good, bright, loving kid. He loved his friends. He loved lacrosse. I never thought he would be dumb enough to get in his car, on a rainy night, on a treacherous, curvy road and do 50-60 miles an hour. Never. I think he made a tragic mistake and it cost him his life.”

(Story continues on inside back cover)
Within minutes after learning their son was dead, Howard and Barbara turned to his many school friends gathered in the ER at Beth Israel Deaconess Hospital. One by one, they cradled the faces of those sobbing teenagers and implored them, from that day on, always to wear seatbelts, be responsible drivers.

The following day, Barbara and Howard met again with scores of Adam’s friends in the cafeteria of the sparkling new Newton North High, each parent pleading with the kids to be smart on the road. Another parent in attendance, Claire Masinton, encouraged Adam’s parents to formalize their heartfelt request as “A Promise to Adam.”

The entire Spivak-London family, including Adam’s three surviving siblings (Eric, 25; Katy, 23; and his twin sister Lizzy) contributed to the language. Masinton, an attorney and the mother of Adam’s close pal, Jared Masinton, drafted the copy and prepared it for the Internet.

No matter how old you are, it’s worth a trip right now to apromisetoadam.com. Click on the bottom line to download the pledge form. All it asks, for the price of your signature, is that you remember to wear a seatbelt, adhere to the speed limit, that you will not drink and drive, or drive whenever impaired, and never to text while driving. The final point of the pledge, perhaps the toughest, is a request to be your friends’ guardian, to do whatever it takes to prevent them from acting irresponsibly behind the wheel.

Adam London is not here to thank you. His family, and the 300 or so enrollees to sign the pledge to date, hope his memory, his spirit, his love of life, and yes, even his mistake on Aug. 23 will remain with you forever.

While his family sat Shiva, the Jewish custom of grief and mourning, the words of one of Adam’s English teachers struck Adam’s mom and dad. According to Howard London, Jim Lallas told them their son “ignited” his class. Adam, with his infectious enthusiasm — forever “connecting dots in unique and curious ways,” according to his dad — was that kid in class who really got the conversation going. When Adam began to talk, his classmates eagerly followed. “A Promise to Adam” offers that opportunity once more.

The Newton North lacrosse team this spring will honor Adam, at the very least with his No. 6 fixed to the goal posts he guarded. Coach Russell “Bussy” Adam said Adam soon was to learn that he would be one of the club’s captains. His goalie spot is left now for either John Hogan, a sophomore, or Josh Wolf, a junior, to fill. For his family, his friends, his teammates, for everyone who knew Adam, the unspeakable void he leaves behind remains impossible to fill.

The lacrosse team attended Adam’s chapel and graveside services en masse. His uncle, Ken London, recalls being struck by the players’ solidarity, as well as their obvious hurt and sorrow.

“You can’t pretend to love a teammate,” said Adam’s uncle. “When a kid’s your teammate, you know everything about him — how he plays, how he lives, if he cares about you. You could see those kids loved him.”

Adam’s teammates stood by until the end, to see his mother kneel at his open gravesite for her last goodbye, to watch his father, adhering to Jewish tradition, toss a shovel full of dirt over the casket and say for all to hear, “I love you, my son.”

“My brother’s voice was cracking,” said Ken London. “Several hundred people there gasped and wept. The dirt hit the casket with the rawest, darkest thud you can imagine.”

Days later, Howard and Barbara visited the Newton firehouse to thank rescue workers for their valiant efforts to save their son. So silent was the room, Howard recalled, that he felt it would have been possible to hear a feather hit the floor.

“The hardest thing imaginable, still, and I’ve yet to come to grips with this,” said Adam’s dad, slow to verbalize his thoughts, “is the realization that I won’t see him again ... I’ll never talk to him again. Kids have to know ... they have to think what this does to families. If the pledge saves one kid, we’ll never know it, but the whole effort will have been worth it.”

A Promise to Adam. The pledge is free, the payoff immeasurable. The cost behind it beyond words.

Kevin Paul Dupont
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