

MOTHER DEDICATES 4 YEARS TO MAKING A DIFFERENCE

Darla Sturdy's story is one that no parent wants to even think about, let alone live through. Four years ago, on June 23, 2003; her 16 year old son died after being stuck by a Tri-met light rail train at Gresham City Hall light rail station.

Aaron Wagner-Sturdy was outgoing and well liked. He started playing baseball when he was five; and began tae-kwon-do at eight, placing 4th in the nation at the Junior Olympics a year later. He played football and basketball, and was in track and wrestling. His eighth grade year he was elected Student Body President in his school of around 750 students. At Gresham High, Aaron continued his sports and also became involved with the drama department. He and his sister, Savanna (now 22), became the first brother and sister at the high school to make state at the same time in drama. Aaron was also actively involved in his church's youth group and with a high school Christian group called Soul Food. "He would be the first one to tell you to 'Do for others before yourself,'" says Sturdy. "He was headed home on his dad's bicycle, after spending a day talking to a youth group.....when he was taken from me he was killed on a pedestrian crosswalk for the light rail system," she explains.

Sturdy (formerly Darla Dibble, daughter of Jack and Arla June Ruthven of Milton-Freewater) grew up in Milton-Freewater and graduated from Mac-Hi in 1979. She then moved to Gresham, Oregon to attend Mt. Hood Community College. There she married Kevin Sturdy. Being from a small town she learned small town values, "You learn it's about taking care of the people and making it safe," she notes. Sturdy says she soon became aware that in larger areas with the big businesses that is not the case.

After the tragedy, she started doing research about safety. "To be able to make a difference, I worked full time and went down to Salem every Wednesday and Friday for five months," Sturdy states. "I met every senator and representative and told my story."

"To me it's about making a difference," she expresses. "I can't bring my son back, but I sure can make it safe so no other mother has to live my life."

When Sturdy first went to Salem she knew nothing about laws. She learned the process and what needed to be done. "There are so many bills to go through that if you don't go and meet each one (legislator) and tell your story, give speeches, and tell them how important it is; you would never pass a law."

The grieving mother soon learned something else. She had to become a lobbyist; as she found you can only be at the capitol 25 hours in a quarter or only spend \$100. "Well, that was not going to happen; I had as many as twelve meetings a day. So as a mom, I was a lobbyist for my son."

Gresham was where the MAX line started in the mid 1980's. At that time they set up gates for the vehicles but not for pedestrians. Schools, shopping areas, apartments and even Gresham City Hall have now been built around the MAX line. In the more recently constructed parts of the light rail, on the West Side, pedestrian gates were installed. Sturdy not only visited with every legislator, but she talked to the people who used the crossings. She gathered letters and testimony from the school administrators, residents, and a petition signed by merchants. She obtained pictures of a hazardous crossing, where a school sets approximately 25 feet from the track. Her research documented 108 pedestrian and bicycle collisions from 1994 to 2006 including the dates and the locations; that even at 35 mph it takes over the length of a football field for the train to stop; and that there was an engineering report on the TriMet system that strongly recommended swing gates when there was a school zone within 600 feet of the light rail.

Listing all of the facts and the many requests by citizens, she asked the lawmakers, "So who is going to make it safe for the people?"

"I'm a Christian," she notes; "and at the capital we have a lot. Some of the legislators actually prayed with me."

Sturdy also wanted the citizens of her hometown area to know about their own representatives. "Senator David Nelson and Representative Greg Smith were a great help at the capital, and the people of your area should be proud to have them in office."

Several legislators sponsored a bill to improve safety on the light rail. After it had passed in the senate Sturdy gave testimony, in May of this year, to the House Transportation Committee; trying to make them understand the urgency of bill. At the conclusion of her remarks, she stated, "I'm here as a Mom. I've told you about my son. I've gathered the facts for you that you have not heard or seen before today. The FACTS ARE THE FACTS - 80% collisions on the Southeast Side compared to 20% on the West Side (where most of the safety gates are since 2000. My Representatives also amended the bill so that legislation can hold TriMet accountable to make it safe. Please make sure this passes the committee so that it can go to the House to become a law and save lives. I wouldn't be here today if I hadn't lost my son Aaron; to make it safe for you and your family. May God be with all of you as you make this decision. My son had a saying, 'Dream big; don't let the little things get in your way.' To me that means, 'It's okay Mom; you can't save me, but you can save someone else.' that's what it's all about - making it safe for your children, your grandchildren, and really anyone you know. IT'S YOUR DECISION — WHAT IS A LIFE WORTH?"

On June 13th Oregon Governor Ted Kulongoski signed Senate Bill 829

which was amended to read 'Aaron's Bridge to Safety,' requiring TriMet to perform an independent study on the safety of their pedestrian light rail crossings. "This.....says a whole lot about our democratic process because here is just one person who is able to make such a huge difference on safety," stated one of the bill's chief sponsors Senator Laurie Monnes Anderson.

Originally, the bill required crossing gates at all unguarded pedestrian crossings along the light rail tracks; but the cost was so huge the legislators knew it wouldn't pass, and they weren't sure which crossings actually needed gates. So by requiring TriMet to pay for an independent safety study, to figure where the accidents occur and where crossing gates are truly needed; they would be able to accomplish their goal. Sturdy, who is especially concerned about the three high schools located on or near the MAX line, was thrilled with the law, "I can't save my son....but I can sure make a difference in somebody else's life." Although it was a long, hard journey; the determined mother never gave up the fight. "It has been four years since my son was killed and I struggle with life," she says. "By passing this law I can turn half of a page and know my son would be proud of me to help make a difference."