

Good Morning.

Principal Hamer, Vice Principal Fannon, Assistant Principals Father Perez, Brother Wilson and Borman, Dean of Students Davis, distinguished administrators, faculty members, students, family and friends, I am honored to be allowed the privilege to speak to the Bishop Ireton community this morning on my son, Mark's, 16th birthday. However, while I'm pleased to be here today, this fact also reminds me that while Mark will always remain among us, he is no longer physically with us.

Mark died in a scooter accident not far from Bishop Ireton. Today, I will not be speaking about the accident. This morning, I will speak to you as a father and share with you the Mark that I know and love; I will speak to you as an educator and share with you the science of errors; and finally I will speak to you as a parent and share with you my thoughts about life choices and respect for life.

I.

From his birth in a mere forty-one minutes to the sparkle in his beautiful blue eyes, Mark was just impulsive and mischievous in a very special way. He was always a very happy kid who valued friendship, loyalty, and a great zest for life. For those of you who directly interacted with Mark, you know that it was not unusual for him to devise a plan, but also to be at the center of the activity to the amusement of his friends.

While some might say Mark merely enjoyed breaking rules, I would prefer to believe he took great joy in pushing rules to their limits. Perhaps if I share a few of Mark's mischievous activities, this may provide you with a better understanding about Mark's personality.

During the last week of third grade at St. Mary's School, Mark devised a plan with a piece of paper to divert the water from the drinking fountain clear across the hallway. He not only devised this plan, but he made photo copies on our home fax machine to distribute to his friends so that they might accomplish this as well. In junior high at St Mary's, Mark continued with his interest making copies following my purchase of a home color copier. Fortunately for Mark, first generation home color copiers were unable to accurately copy ice cream tickets or US money well enough to be accepted as the real thing.

Recently, I learned that Mark devised a practical joke involving his brother's lacrosse bag where in the middle of a movie theater lobby, just to see the response of the patrons, Mark had his friends zip himself into the bag. Then as the patrons initially entered the theatre, Mark moved slowly inside the bag. Later he increased his movements and finally he rose from the bag to the amazement of the patrons, the laughter of his friends, and naturally to the frustration of the establishment. Mark and his friends were requested to leave the theater.

Mark and I both loved technology and together with his brother Matt, we spent many hours upgrading the software and hardware on their computers and on our home network, but it was not always that way. In the not too distant past, I spent much of my time limiting Mark's computer access and Mark spent significantly less time successfully overcoming all of the restrictions I created.

In one situation, Mark learned about a weakness in Microsoft's Windows Advanced Server 2000 and exploited this weakness to make himself the system administrator. He took great pride in accomplishing this feat and celebrated his accomplishment by locking me out of the system! Mark was also generous with his talents and he successfully helped his close friends circumvent their parents' attempts to restrict their computer access.

Some of you may remember one particularly unique prank Mark performed last year at BI which resulted in a visit with Ms. Davis. Over the weekend, Richard Pastorino, one of Mark's best friends, to razz his brother Ed, shaved the word "Ed" into Mark's hair on the right side of his head. During the next several days at BI, Mark proudly sported that look at school. He would turn to the right, blocking his shaved head and appear perfectly normal to his teachers and turn to the left to the enjoyment of his classmates in a clear violation of the hair rule.

Ultimately Mark was caught, and the jig was up. For the next several weeks Mark sported a near bald buzz cut.

Mark's mantra was simply "go big or go home." To paraphrase one BI administrator who became quite fond of Mark during his frequent visits, "Mark always felt that if he wasn't caught pushing the rule, he really wasn't trying."

While I'm not condoning any of these behaviors or encouraging anyone here to push limits, it was this quality of Mark's character that provided entertainment to his peers, occasionally frustrated his teachers, and always provided parenting opportunities for Michele and me. It is these behaviors for which Mark will long be remembered.

On the subject of parenting, Mark, as well as his brother, Matt and sisters, Ali and Anna, all could recite our three basic parenting rules. The first two rules directly relate to behaviors and the third, the most important, relates to our core value – loving each other.

With our first rule, we made it clear that no matter how upset or angry you became when we asked a question you always talked at all times and about any issue. Our second rule that "you must always tell the truth" was unwavering. It was critical that when you talked, you spoke the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the

truth. This was kind of like being on the witness stand in a legal proceeding, but unlike the law for telling the truth, there was always complete and absolute forgiveness with no punishment or retribution whatsoever.

Please understand, as parents, there were limits to our forgiveness to our children for repeating poor behaviors especially as they became teenagers. In these situations, they came to learn that their so called “get out of jail free card” for telling the truth now reduced any punishment for their poor choices, and for not telling the truth, the severity of their restrictions increased.

The third and final rule is the most important, and I believe critical to our parenting. “We will always love you” with the second component “no matter what.” Most of you here today know that your parents have unconditional love for you. But sometimes this may come into question when you frustrate them with your poor behavioral choices. So our third rule emphasized our love as all inclusive, unconditional, and forever.

Mark knew all these rules, and in knowing them, he would sometimes work them to his advantage. If there was an issue in question, he first would invoke the telling the truth rule to reduce any punishment. Then when I was about to lose it, frustrated with his poor behavioral choice, he would remind me about the “no matter what” component of the “I always love you” rule.

II.

Speaking to you now as an educator, I would like to briefly share with you the science of errors. Most of you know that as a full time practicing obstetrician and gynecologist, I provide medical care to women, delivering babies, performing surgery, and providing office-based medical care. Additionally, I provided advice to the Inova Health System Medication Safety Committee.

In this consulting role, I study medical and specifically medication errors with particular attention to those which cause significant harm including death.

In 1999 the Institute of Medicine studied medical errors in their landmark report entitled “To Err is Human: Building a Safer Healthcare System.” Following this initial report, a blue ribbon panel was created to recommend reforms to reduce the over 98,000 deaths that occur each year due to medical errors. To put this into perspective, there are more preventable hospital deaths than all the deaths from motor vehicles, breast cancer, or AIDS.

No matter who you are, we all make errors which may cause serious bad effects. It is for this reason that the science of decision making should be critically important to everyone.

Decision-making errors are divided into three types: “skill based” errors, “knowledge based” errors, and “rule based” errors.

The most frequently occurring error types are “skill based” or what I would like to call “Ooops” errors. Examples of “skill based” errors include the time you overlooked a classroom assignment, the time you arrived late at home on Friday night, or the time you forgot your mother’s or father’s birthday. Most of the time, you are able to compensate for these errors without any major consequences or serious bad effects. However, one in a thousand times a skill based error will cause a serious bad effect.

If when you overlooked the assignment, you received a failing grade for that required college course, and you are rejected, then a serious bad effect has occurred. If when you arrived late, you are grounded and are not able to go to homecoming, then a serious bad effect has occurred. Finally, if when you forgot your parent’s birthday, your parent becomes so upset that you are removed from the will, then a serious bad effect really has occurred. Thankfully these “skill based” errors which occur frequently rarely cause serious bad effects.

On the other hand, “knowledge based” errors are just the opposite. They occur rarely, but often cause serious bad effects. These “knowledge based” errors occur when improperly trained individuals attempt to perform a challenging or difficult

task. An adult “knowledge based” example might occur when a surgeon without proper training attempts to use a new surgical tool, and a patient is harmed. A youthful “knowledge based” error might occur when a teenager attempts to drive a motor vehicle, and the car is damaged or worse. In one out of every ten times “knowledge based” errors will result in a serious bad effect. Thankfully “knowledge based” errors are rare since most people do not attempt tasks in which they have little or no knowledge.

The third and final error type is a “rule based” error. In a “rule based” error, the person is informed or trained about the rule, and despite this knowledge, the person chooses either not to follow it or creates a way to avoid the rule in what is described as a “work around.” “Rule based” errors, therefore, are the most difficult to eradicate since they occur with forethought, and they are the most dangerous since they occur intentionally. This error type is the most important type of error for you to understand as it will have a profound effect on each of your lives.

Let me provide you a few real life “rule based” examples to impress upon you the severity of these errors. There are undeniable facts that a “rule based” error occurred on September 12, 2008, on the Metrolink train in California which contributed to a head on crash causing the death of 25 people. There are undeniable facts that a “rule based” error occurred on July 22, 2004, at Inova

Fairfax Hospital which contributed to the incorrect blood transfusion and the death of a young mother. There are undeniable facts that “rule based” errors occurred on July 26, 2008, which contributed to Mark’s death.

All of us at times, believe that rules are made for others and not for us. We are careful, the rule interferes with our activities, the rule increases our time, the rule is unnecessary, and the rule is simply “stupid.” Nothing bad will ever happen.

Most rules were made in response to an unexpected outcome which did take place. Since unexpected serious bad effects occur relatively infrequently, we may not remember the serious bad effect which occurred necessitating the creation of the rule. The risk of a serious bad effect from a “rule based” error is one time in fifty violations of the rule.

While I do not know exactly what occurred Saturday July 26th at 12:42 pm, I do know that Mark failed to follow rules. First, Mark was required to ask permission, secondly Mark was instructed not to ride outside of our neighborhood, and finally under no circumstances was Mark to ride with anyone.

“Rule based” errors contributed to the deadly train crash in California, “rule based” errors contributed to the death at Inova Fairfax Hospital, and “rule based” errors contributed to Mark’s scooter death in Alexandria.

“Rule based” errors are unquestionably the most difficult to eradicate since failure to follow rules occurs intentionally and with forethought. “Rule based” errors continue throughout adulthood and are also the most dangerous in our society today causing most of our non-nature related serious bad effects.

III.

As I said at the beginning, I would be speaking to you as a father and as an educator. Now I will be speaking to you as a parent. While there are many reasons I agreed to speak to you this morning, sharing with you my thoughts as a parent about life choices and respect for life is the most important: life choices and respect for life.

Each and every day of our lives we are all are faced with countless choices. While during your daily activities you may not believe any one choice makes a difference, all choices make a difference, and some choices will make a life-changing difference.

The difficulty lies in knowing which choice will be that all important critical one which will make a life-changing difference. Just as in the gospel of Matthew, Chapter 24, and I quote, “you do not know on which day your Lord will be coming,” so, too, you do not know which choice will make a life-changing difference. So the real question then becomes what should you do?

Let me tell you what I do. Each and every day many of the choices I make as a physician are truly life changing. The choice that I make during a birth, the choice I make during a surgery, or even the choice I make in my office practice involving a seriously ill patient are choices that I know will make life-changing differences. However, like you, most of my choices are far less clear because I have no real idea which choice will make a life changing difference. While I do not know which choice will be that life-changing choice, I understand the basis for making good choices. I follow the rules.

And so today, I plead with you all that when you are unsure, and it is unclear which path to follow, make it simple - follow the rules. These are the rules you are taught by your parents, the rules you are taught by your teachers, and the rules you are taught by trusted individuals in our society. This path will always guide you to the correct choice.

Now I'm requesting that you all make what I am calling the "rules based" pledge. This pledge is to avoid risky behaviors through "rule based" choices in three very critical areas which will affect your lives as high school adults:

Drinking, Driving, and Drugs – the 3 D's

You all know the rules so there is no need for me to repeat them here today. I am simply asking you all to make a pledge and say:

“My choices will follow the rules for drinking, driving, and drugs.”

Are you all ready to repeat after me?

“My choices will follow the rules for drinking, driving and drugs”.

Respect for life. I firmly believe you will only gain respect for all life when you have respect for each other and respect for your life as enormously valuable.

Just over three hours ago I delivered eight-month twins by an emergency Cesarean Section, and fortunately both, though premature, were born health. – a girl weighing 2 lbs 3 oz and a boy weighing 2 lbs and 12 oz. Six hours earlier, I participated in the delivery of five-month twins to parents who were not so luck because both were still-born weighing just under six ounces. While I followed the rules in both cases, the outcomes were not the same. Nonetheless, you do get the best outcome by always following the rules. Life is precious and it is to be cherished.

Mark and I would often “man hug” each other in private demonstrating our respect and love for each other.

And so in closing for Mark, for me, and, most importantly, for each other, I ask you all to stand up now.

If you and your neighbor are comfortable, hug each other, but if you prefer, a simple handshake will do. This simple act will demonstrate your respect and love for each other, your respect for your life, and your respect for all life.

I want to thank you all for your kind attention today.

God bless you all.

Dr. Mark Fracasso

9/24/2008

Webmaster's note: If you would like to send Dr. Fracasso a note, his e-mail address is mfracasso@whealthcare.com.