

## A Journey Through Grief

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For the families of four Brock teens, the devastation caused by a drunken driver didn't end with their daughters' deaths

By Melody McDonald  
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BROCK -- It's been seven years since Rickey Carter got drunk, drove his pickup the wrong way down Ranger Highway, and slammed into a car carrying four of Brock's brightest teens.

Staci Lee and Whitney Welch, both 16, died instantly. Mandi McWhorter, 15, lived for 11 more hours. Lacey Osina, 17, lost her fight three days later.

The wreck devastated this farming community 35 miles west of Fort Worth, sent Carter to prison and left four sets of parents with only memories of their daughters.

The pain was unbearable. Some parents turned to God and family. One mother turned to drugs.

Three marriages have dissolved.

Only one father doesn't hurt anymore. He is buried next to his little girl in a Millsap cemetery.

During the past year, the parents talked about what their lives have been like since their daughters' deaths, about dealing with their grief, about their thoughts of the man who stole it all.

Some believe the tragedy has made them stronger. They have learned to live again. Others are still struggling.

Their stories are vastly different.

Their pain is the same.

The wreck

Staci, Whitney, Mandi and Lacey were seemingly perfect daughters.

All were beautiful girls, top students and athletes with strong morals and a deep faith in God.

"They were always together," said Doug McWhorter, Mandi's dad.

Dec. 19, 1998, was no exception. It was the first day of Christmas break, a carefree Saturday night for the foursome.

After returning home from winning a basketball game against Graford, the girls drove to nearby Weatherford to eat at Taco Bueno.

The plan was to go back to McWhorter's home, sit in the hot tub and watch Christmas movies.

Rickey Carter, driving home from a deer lease in Erath County, changed all that.

It was about 11 p.m. when the girls turned their car west onto Spur 312, also known as Ranger Highway, and headed for home.

Officials have said Staci, who was driving Whitney's Nissan Maxima, attempted to avoid Carter's pickup by pulling onto the shoulder when he swerved into her lane. It wasn't enough.

A carload of friends following the girls drove up on the crash immediately after it happened. They approached the mangled Maxima, called out the names of the four girls and desperately tried to open the car's door. The girls were motionless inside.

Lacey's parents were at home watching television when her father got the call from one of Lacey's friends.

"I told Liz, 'Lets go, there has been a wreck,'" Mark Osina recalled.

Lacey's mother said when they got in the car, her husband didn't say anything about where or how bad the wreck was.

"We got to the highway, I-20, and he just started saying Our Father and Hail Mary over and over again," Liz Osina said, crying. "He kept repeating it. I kept saying, 'What are you doing? Why are you saying that? Tell me what is going on.'"

When the Osinas got close to the crash site, they saw nothing but a sea of flashing lights from emergency vehicles.

"The first thing that went through my mind was, 'Oh no, something has happened up there. We're going to have to go a different way to get to the girls,'" Liz Osina recalled. "It never once crossed my mind that that was the wreck."

Staci's mother and father were in their car when they received a call from another parent. They raced to the scene.

When a sheriff's deputy told them they couldn't get any closer to the wreckage, Staci's mother jumped out of the car and made a run for it. Her husband threw the car into park and also ran to the wreckage.

"There was nothing left but the driver's seat," said Vicki Cole, Staci's mother. "There was a white sheet over it."

Officials directed the girls' parents, most of whom had arrived at the scene, to Campbell Memorial Hospital in Weatherford.

Cole said she watched as one of the girls was brought in by ambulance.

"I ran in and Lezlie, Mandi's mother, was running beside me," Cole said. "I said, 'It's Staci.' She said, 'No, it's not. It's Mandi.' I had to look at her toes to recognize it wasn't Staci. That is how bad she was."

Cole was told to wait in the emergency room.

"People were coming in and telling me that my daughter was dead," Cole said, starting to cry. "They were staring at me real funny, you know. The first thing you do is start praying and bargaining with God. You just think, there is no way this could be happening. She is too young."

Finally, Cole said, her worst fears were confirmed.

Staci, her only child, was not coming to the hospital.

Neither was Whitney.

They were on the way to the Tarrant County morgue.

At the hospital

Lacey and Mandi, the two surviving girls, were quickly transported from Campbell to Harris Methodist Fort Worth Hospital.

"I remember holding her hand the whole night, talking to her and kissing her on the cheek," said Lezlie Michael, Mandi's mother. "... There was a blood spot on her cheek in the shape of a heart. I'll never forget that.

"That is where I kept kissing her."

Mandi's father remembers begging the doctor.

"I said, 'I don't care how much it costs, I don't care how long we have to be here. I just want y'all to save my daughter's life,'" Doug McWhorter said. "At that point, he told us that he needed to be truthful and honest with me. He said that they did not think that Mandi would leave the unit alive."

On Dec. 20 -- roughly 11 hours after the wreck -- Mandi's mother, father and 12-year-old brother, Ryan, told her goodbye.

"We told her that we loved her and that we understood, and that when she got ready to go home, she could -- that we would be OK," Doug McWhorter said. "I watched my daughter take her last breath. She died at 10 o'clock that morning."

Mandi's mother said an indescribable amount of peace came over her.

"I felt like it was a glimpse of heaven," she said. "A glimpse of her new life."

Lacey, meanwhile, was on a different floor of the hospital.

Doctors initially told her family that she had a chance. After emergency surgery to repair internal injuries, doctors told them they needed to worry about her head injury.

Forty-eight hours later, hospital officials began talking to the family about organ donation.

Her mother and father knew what to do. When Lacey turned 16 and got her driver's license, she had already told her mother that she wished to be a donor.

"I think maybe God took care of that early for us," her mother, Liz Osina, said.

On the morning of Dec. 22, Lacey's mother lay on one side of her, while her younger sister, 14-year-old Emily, lay on the other.

The Osinas then said their goodbyes.

Mark Osina said he finally had to drag his wife and daughter away from Lacey's bedside. Mark Osina's brother drove the family home.

"It was the worst feeling of my life," Mark Osina said.

The grieving begins

During the week of Christmas, four funerals were held in Brock.

Only 80 people lived in the rural Parker County town, but hundreds attended the funerals.

Staci and Whitney were buried on Dec. 22. Mandi and Lacey were laid to rest the day after Christmas.

In a span of a few days, Brock High School lost three basketball players, half of its cheerleading squad, two homecoming queens and four honor students.

"I was just numb," said Pax Welch, Whitney's mother. "It is all you can do just to get up. I just prayed to God to hold my heart in his hands because it was about to fall out of my body."

Mandi's mother said she left her daughter's room the same way for a long time, including the backpack Mandi had dropped on the floor after her basketball game.

"Just being in the house after everybody had gone and going through the things in her room and bathroom, that's when it all hit," she said. "She wasn't coming back."

Lacey's mother said that after they returned home from the hospital she went into Lacey's room and ran her hand across a biology notebook on her bed "so I could feel her handwriting."

Staci's mother, meanwhile, couldn't eat or sleep. She chain-smoked and began relying on painkillers she had been prescribed after an earlier car wreck.

"I went through a carton of cigarettes a day," Vickie Cole said. "It was terrible. I was popping pills and going through cigarettes, crying the whole time. It hurt to get up, to breathe."

The fathers also were dealing with their grief in their own ways.

The day after Lacey's funeral, Mark Osina went back to work as the men's basketball coach at Weatherford College, a job he still has today.

"The president came and said we can get someone to take my place for a while," Mark Osina recalled. "I told him I wanted to keep doing what I was doing. ... As long as I could stay in the gym and didn't have to go around and listen and talk to people, I would rather just ride it out right here."

Mandi's father turned to God.

"I just asked God what he wanted me to do," Doug McWhorter said.

Staci's father, David Lee, found God.

On the day after Staci's funeral, Lee said, he stopped by the home of the pastor who had presided over her service to bring him doughnuts. He found Carey Killough and his family praying.

It was icy that day, and Killough's children were having car trouble in Brownwood, Lee said. The pastor had never spent Christmas without his children and was praying for a way to get them home safely.

Lee said he offered to drive him the next day, Christmas Eve, in Staci's truck.

"As we were driving along, we got to Morgan Mill, a real pretty area on [U.S.] 281, and he asked me what my plans were now," Lee recalled. "I said, 'Well, I'd like to get to heaven to see Staci.' He said, 'Well, we can take care of that right now.'"

That day, in the car with Killough, Lee became a Christian.

Tough times

The year following the girls' deaths was the hardest.

"All four of them were cheerleaders," said Mandi's mother, Lezlie Michael. "You had eight cheerleaders on the court and, after you come back [from Christmas break], there are only four."

Brock's basketball teams wore ribbons in their hair with the girls' names on them or uniform patches with the girls' numbers: 4 for Mandi, 10 for Lacey, 11 for Staci and a W for Whitney, who didn't play basketball.

"It was during basketball season and, in Brock, basketball is such a huge thing," Michael said. "The basketball team wanted to win every game for those girls."

It didn't help that families were grieving under a spotlight. Reporters and photographers were everywhere, especially basketball games.

Lacey's sister, Emily, a freshman at the time, was a starter for the Lady Eagles.

Reporters migrated to her and, in many cases, made the story about her wanting to carry on her sister's legacy, rather than about the team's success. She said she experienced a backlash from friends and teammates. People accused her of using her sister's death to get attention.

"I got a lot of attention, attention I didn't want," she said. "I remember telling people, 'Do you actually think that I want an article in the paper about my sister dying? Do you think I actually asked for that?'"

She said it wasn't much better in the classroom.

"Every time I cried in class or something, I realized it was a mistake because people started saying, 'She is just crying for attention,'" she said.

Lacey's mother said she herself was dysfunctional by then. Not only was Lacey dead, but Liz Osina felt like Emily was being treated cruelly.

She tried to go back to work as the Brock Elementary School principal, but she couldn't.

"I just felt like I couldn't give the children what they needed," she said. "I took a leave of absence."

She said she later moved over to the administration building to assist the superintendent. But work was the furthest thing from her mind.

"Twice during lunch they had to come and get me because I was stuck in the mud at the cemetery," she said.

On the first anniversary of the girls' deaths, Liz Osina said, she was supposed to go to the elementary school to collect ornaments the students had made for her. The year before, her husband, in his anger and grief over Lacey's death, had thrown out the tree, ornaments and all.

"I just couldn't make myself go up there," she recalled.

So, she said, someone dumped the ornaments on the floor of her den and left a note on top of it, "telling me I need to get over this and worry about the children that love you."

"If I can tell anybody anything, it would be that you can't judge or tell someone how to grieve," said Liz Osina, who eventually resigned from the district. "No two people grieve alike. It doesn't get better. You learn to live with it and that's it. At least that is the way it has been for me."

A difficult trial

Two years after the wreck, Carter's case was scheduled for trial.

It wasn't without controversy.

District Attorney Don Schnebly and defense attorney Jerry Loftin had brokered a plea deal that divided the families and, in many ways, the community.

In exchange for Carter's guilty plea on four charges of intoxication manslaughter, prosecutors agreed that one jury -- instead of four -- would assess Carter's punishment for the girls' deaths, and the sentences would run concurrently. So, instead of facing 80 years in prison, Carter faced a maximum of 20.

Both sides agreed to allow the victims' families to give narrative presentations to the jury, which included showing videotapes and photo albums, even playing songs written about the girls -- evidence that normally wouldn't be allowed during a trial.

Typically, families are not permitted to address the defendant or speak about how a crime has affected them until after sentencing.

"I would be surprised if anything like that happens in my career again," said prosecutor Jeff Swain, who tried the case with Schnebly. "It resembled a memorial service more than a trial."

Mandi's and Whitney's parents were satisfied with the plea bargain agreement; Staci's and Lacey's were opposed to it and felt that Schnebly had sold them out.

They were not alone. On the day jury selection began, dozens of people demonstrated outside the Parker County courthouse in Weatherford. Some carried signs calling for Schnebly's resignation.

"I think the biggest reason the public reacted was because we couldn't discuss the plea agreement until it went through court ... for fear of impacting jurors before it goes to trial," Swain said. "People heard 'plea agreement' and got really mad. But we put it in the jury's hands and ended up getting the maximum sentence we could get."

Swain said trying Carter on each case would have taken years, would have been extremely difficult for the families and likely would have meant a change of venue. Even then, there would be no guarantees that the judge would impose consecutive sentences.

Carter didn't even have a speeding ticket on his record and was eligible for probation, Swain said. The prosecutors' best course of action was to allow jurors to see the impact that Carter had on all the girls and their families at the same time and hope for the maximum.

Defense attorney Loftin called Carter "as good a citizen as there ever was." He pointed out that Carter took minority children whose parents were drug addicts into his home, and he supported the schools and the community. Many people, from police officers to church members, supported him during his trial, he said.

"His life was shattered and destroyed," Loftin said. "He was suicidal over the matter."

Mandi's mother said the trial was an extremely difficult for everyone, including Carter's family.

"I remember at one point during the trial, on one side you had all of us grieving, and then on their side they were grieving, too," she said. "I had to leave the courtroom. There was too much hurt in that room."

#### Falling apart

By the time the trial was over, three out of the four marriages were unraveling.

"We didn't know how to handle it," Staci's mother, Vickie Cole, said. "Me and David couldn't even look at each other without crying for four months."

Cole, who acknowledged she became more dependent on drugs, said her husband stayed upstairs and she stayed downstairs. By the time the trial came around, the couple were already separated.

Finally, after 18 years of marriage, they divorced.

Lezlie and Doug McWhorter's marriage was suffering, too.

"When you lose a child, it is just so painful," Mandi's mother said. "We never, ever, ever blamed each other. We went through a lot together.

"I think our marriage got stronger, initially, because we needed each other. Then we just got to a place where we became different people through our grief. We grieved differently. Instead of grieving together, we grieved apart."

Whitney's parents, Pax and Greg Welch, divorced in 2003 on friendly terms. Pax Welch said they were better suited as friends.

"Out of respect for Whitney, we felt like we needed to get along," Pax Welch said. "We had another child, Lance, and that was the most important thing for both of us."

The next year, Greg Welch, a cutting-horse trainer who is in the National Cutting Horse Association Riders Hall of Fame, died of cancer. He is buried next to his daughter at the Fairview Cemetery in Millsap.

Mandi's father recalled the day he stopped by the hospital to see Greg Welch.

"He told me, 'I'm ready to go to heaven and cut with my daughter,'" Doug McWhorter said.

Lacey's parents are the only ones still married today.

"I'm sure there are times we could each tell you that we wanted to get in the car and put it in drive and point it anywhere," Liz Osina said. "I know the thought has been in all of our minds. The easiest thing would be to do that."

She said their love is strong, even in times of weakness.

"It was always just the four of us and, in the blink of an eye, there were three of us," she said. "We had to find ourselves; we had no idea who we were."

#### Moving on

Lacey, Mandi and Staci are buried side-by-side in the Brock cemetery. A marble statue representing Whitney stands next to their graves.

There is a tall lantern that Mandi's father, who lives nearby, keeps lit.

Lacey's father still mows the grass there once a week.

School officials and the families created the Brock Memorial Scholarship in memory of the girls. Each year, a Brock High School graduate is awarded \$1,000 a semester for four years.

The parents also helped lobby the Texas Legislature to reduce the blood alcohol level that legally defines a driver as intoxicated from .10 to .08.

Officials said Carter's blood alcohol level at the time of the wreck was measured at .16, but his defense attorney has said another test showed it at .12.

Mandi's father runs an alcohol awareness program called Eagle Wings to Angel Wings, a way to keep the girls' memories alive and educate teens about the choices they make.

He has spoken to thousands of students at hundreds of schools and feels the girls are making a difference in young people's lives.

"It has nothing to do with me," Doug McWhorter said. "It has to do with the four girls and their testimony to those kids. I'm just the guy that puts it on."

Today, McWhorter, a land man for Devon Energy Production Company, is remarried and lives in Brock with his wife, Sharon. He has a 16-year-old stepdaughter, Nicole Bynum.

"I thank God everyday for sending a daughter into my life," Doug McWhorter said. "I tell her, 'You will never take Mandi's place, but you are my daughter.' "

Mandi's brother, Ryan, is now 19 and plays drums in a band called Valeyra.

Mandi's mother, an administrator for a nursing home, is remarried and lives in Benbrook with her husband, Jim. She, also, has a teen-age stepdaughter, Johnnye Michael, 14.

She, along with her ex-husband and Staci's father, are among those who have forgiven Rickey Carter.

"I remember the very day that I did," she said. "It was a huge, huge relief for me, like a thousand pounds had been lifted off. ... I had to forgive him honestly and truthfully and wholeheartedly before I could heal and move on and have a halfway decent life."

Staci's mother, Vickie Cole, can't find forgiveness in her heart -- and told Carter as much during his trial.

"I walked right up to him and said, 'You know, I'll never forgive you for what you have done.'"

Cole, who was interviewed in the spring, has spent time in jail on drug charges since her daughter's death.

After the trial, she became convinced that there was a cover-up and has a conspiracy theory that she believes to this day.

She is convinced that boys in two other cars were racing the girls at the time of the crash. She believes that the drivers took off and, to protect the boys, officers tampered with the crime scene by moving the wrecked car.

Officials and the other families do not share her suspicions.

"The investigation didn't reveal that anyone other than Rickey Carter was the cause of this wreck," prosecutor Swain said.

Staci's father, David Lee, is co-owner of Apache's Choppers, a high-end motorcycle shop in Weatherford. He recently remarried and lives in Brock with his wife, Nikki, and her 9-year-old son, Aaron.

He feels confident that he will get to heaven to be with his daughter someday.

"I may not be the best Christian," Lee said, "but he still takes us all anyway."

Lacey's parents, the Osinas, live in Weatherford and work at Weatherford College. Their daughter Emily, who played basketball for Weatherford College and the University of New Orleans, recently moved home and is finishing up her college credits at Tarleton State University. She plans to graduate in May.

The Osinas, who also have not forgiven Carter, have been giving some thought lately to trying to contact the man who received Lacey's heart.

"For seven years, I really wasn't prepared, mentally or emotionally," Liz Osina said. "But it would be nice to meet him."

Pax Welch is a flight attendant who spends a great deal of time traveling. Her son, Lance, lives in Las Vegas and recently passed the bar exam.

Whitney is never far from her thoughts.

"The greatest gift in life was to be her mother," Pax Welch said.

The families don't keep in contact as much as they used to, but they know they will forever be united by a drunken-driving wreck that stole their daughters on a carefree Saturday night, the first day of Christmas break.

"Your heart aches for them everyday," Pax Welch said. "Not a day goes by that you don't think about it and wish it wasn't so."

#### THE FAMILY OF LACEY OSINA

Of all the crash victims' parents, Mark and Liz Osina, shown with their daughter Emily, are the only couple still married. They have not forgiven Rickey Carter and hope that he will serve every day of his 20-year sentence.

#### THE FAMILY OF MANDI McWHORTER

Mandi's parents divorced in the years following her death, and both have remarried. Doug McWhorter, shown at the gravesite of three of the girls, above, gives alcohol-awareness presentations at schools. Lezlie Michael, a nursing-home administrator, is shown with her husband, Jim, and her son, Ryan, 19. Both of Mandi's parents have forgiven Rickey Carter.

#### THE FAMILY OF WHITNEY WELCH

Whitney's parents, Greg and Pax Welch, divorced in 2003 but remained good friends. Greg Welch died of cancer the next year and is buried next to his daughter in Millsap. In Brock, a marble statue, representing Whitney stands next to the graves of Staci, Mandi and Lacey, left.

#### THE FAMILY OF STACI LEE

Staci's parents separated shortly after her death and later divorced, after 18 years of marriage. David Lee, shown on Page 1A, is remarried and has forgiven Rickey Carter. Vickie Cole has not.

## RICKEY CARTER

Rickey Carter, 47, pleaded guilty to four counts of intoxication manslaughter and is serving his 20-year sentence in a Gatesville prison. He has been up for parole twice, and twice he has been denied. He will now be up for parole each year until he is released.

This year, Janelle Shepard, a nurse at Harris Methodist Fort Worth hospital, created a Web site, [www.keeprickycarterinjail.com](http://www.keeprickycarterinjail.com). It's a way for the community to express its opinions to the parole board about Carter's release. "It was amazing," said Lacey's mother, Liz Osina. "Her premise was, 'They don't have to go through this every year alone. As a community, we need to support them.'"

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