

## Vulnerability Saved My Life

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When most hear the word “vulnerability,” they usually react with an eye roll, phone check, or conversation change. Body language shifts from slouching in chairs to crossing arms or stuffing hands in pockets. This is how students wait for someone to tell them to be vulnerable, to claim and proclaim their stories, without actually *going* there with them; and there lies the struggle any advisor runs into – connecting with their students. Advisors ask students to share their stories without sharing their own. It’s challenging. Socially constructed boundaries make it difficult to show your authentic self and appear vulnerable, but still be internally grounded in your safe space. Advisors do this to protect themselves, but students see right through it. Therefore, fraternity and sorority professionals must press forward into the void that is vulnerability and own it, because if we don’t, we not only rob ourselves, but our students as well.

I speak from experience. For most of my life, I lived in that area, the seemingly vulnerable area that was actually my safe space. I wanted to show the façade I was being fully open, but didn’t want to actually go there. I was afraid. Confronting raw fear takes immense courage, and I didn’t have it. My fear had built up for ten years, and for the longest time, I did an excellent job of hiding it. I realized while doing so the relationships in my life were suffering because I wasn’t investing in them. You see, I was afraid of losing relationships, so I always kept my friends at a distance. Eventually, I recognized this wasn’t only affecting me, it was affecting everyone I loved and cared about. I was letting my fear control me, thinking that being vulnerable and sharing my story would be seen as weak. So, I would like to take this opportunity to share my story, because, as it turns out, owning your fear and being vulnerable is the bravest thing you can do.

On November 30, 2002, at the age of ten, I lost my sixteen-year-old sister, Mallory Naab, in a car accident. At such a young age, I did not know, nor could I comprehend, the void death creates. At that young age, I became a man. I was no longer the boy who enjoyed being blissfully unaware, playing video games all night long. I stopped crying, believing if I ignored my feelings, I would get over them. This lasted for ten years. I became an empty young man, connecting better with my parents’ friends, because they understood the trials of life better than my ten-year-old classmates. At this time, I also became an only child without anyone to play with or talk to. Soon, though unrecognized at the time, I became depressed. In order to hide this struggle, I became hyper-involved in anything and everything. In grade school, this manifested into playing multiple sports, auditioning for several musical productions within my community, and traveling the world. Despite these experiences, and my parents providing everything for me, I was still utterly alone, continuously attempting to fill the void my sister’s death had created. It was not until my freshman year of high school I figured out what I wanted to do with my life; I wanted to become a public servant.

During my freshman year of high school, I began demanding answers about my sister's death. I wanted to know who the man was who killed my sister, how it happened, and what, if anything, came from the legal process. What my father shared was heartbreaking. The man who had killed my sister had seven different drugs in his system at the time of the accident. Moreover, he was driving with a suspended license, which was revoked by the State of Ohio three times prior to the accident. Despite all of this, my sister Mallory was found causal of the accident, because she pulled out in front of this man, and was subsequently hit by his car. Due to this circumstance, and the limited technology at the time, the man who killed my sister was sentenced to ninety days in jail – the maximum allowed under the Ohio Revised Code for operating a motorized vehicle with a suspended license. Technology, at the time, had not progressed far enough to determine the toxicity levels of the drugs within his system.

As I processed this information, I began researching the laws pertaining to license suspensions. According to the American Automobile Association (AAA) Foundation for Traffic Safety, nearly one in five fatal car accidents involve at least one person who did not have a valid license (AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety, 2008). Moreover, the Ohio Bureau of Motorized Vehicles asserted that in Ohio, approximately 14.6 percent of drivers are operating a vehicle with an invalid license, compared to much lower rates in neighboring Indiana and Kentucky (Ohio Bureau of Motor Vehicles, 2015). With Mallory, and this information in mind, I knew I wanted to enact change. Through my high school guidance counselor, I learned about the Ohio Youth in Government Conference, an experiential learning opportunity for high school students to write and debate mock legislation in the Ohio House and Senate chambers. If a student's proposed legislation passed through committee, it was sent to the House or Senate floor for open discussion. Once passage was secured at this level, it was then sent on to the Youth Governor for their consideration. Any bills that made it to this level would be sent on to our elected officials so they could become privy to the issues young leaders were exploring. Once I learned this, I knew my mission – I wanted our state leaders to reconsider the current license suspension laws that allowed the man who killed my sister to walk free after only three months in jail. I wrote "The Mallory Bill," which strengthened the current penalties for repeat offenders caught driving with an invalid license. This five-page piece of legislation became my fixation. I poured hours into reviewing the Ohio Revised Code, state and national studies, even contacting local officials for their critique. I presented my final bill to the five hundred student attendees at the Ohio Youth in Government Conference. It was with much excitement my bill passed unanimously and was sent on to members of the Ohio Legislature.

While my classmates were going to football or basketball practice, I stopped running cross-country so I could focus the entirety of my energy on this bill. I was scheduling meetings with various state representatives and senators, attempting to gain their support. Over the course of my freshman year, I met with different leaders, including Senator Bill Seitz and Butler County Prosecutor Robin Piper, to gain their perspective and potential endorsement. After receiving much support, and nearly twice as many "no's," I finally received sponsorship from State Representatives Bill Batchelder, Shawn Webster, Barbara Boyd, and Gerald Stebelton. Now, as a fifteen-year-old high school student, I was able to work with and learn from the leaders of our

state, as we crafted Ohio House Bill 504, a 219-line resolution requiring probationary driver's license holders to complete a juvenile driver enhancement seminar prior to being granted limited driving privileges during a license suspension. Unfortunately, on March 12, 2008, House Bill 504 was defeated in the Infrastructure, Homeland Security, and Veteran's Affairs Committee. After seeing a glimmer of hope, devastation ensued, as it seemed that not only the bill was defeated, but I was as well.

Although I was distraught, neither this story, nor my inspiration for pursuing a career in government, ended. I learned vulnerability is vital to success and I can never give up on making a difference. This transformational experience led me to run for Student Body President at the University of Cincinnati. As someone who struggled with mental illness because of the death of my sister, addressing the mental health needs of the student body became a priority of mine. Upon learning nearly half of college-aged individuals suffer from a diagnosable psychiatric disorder (Blanco et al., 2008), I knew I had to act.

After days of researching, proposal drafting, and meeting with countless university officials, my team and I successfully acquired \$450,000 of new funding to be allocated to the university's Counseling and Psychological Services Center. This commitment by the University of Cincinnati ensured all students could see a psychologist free of charge for their first five visits. It meant students could receive the life-saving services they needed to be successful. For me, this project helped me face own my fear. It forced me to be vulnerable, because if I was not, I would have never succeeded in securing the funding and support to make that project a success. You see, this journey, and owning my fear, helped thousands of people, but it also saved my life because it forced me to know and understand my authentic self. As advisors, it is our duty to lead by example by showing our authentic self and helping our students not only discover who they are, but guiding them in how they can create their own identity. This is our call to action. This is our defining responsibility and it revolves around one central theme – vulnerability.

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