Be Smart. Buddy Up.

Written in memory of Ricky Gonzales: my lifting buddy, my wrestling partner, my brother.

Upon entering the UWEC Wrestling room you can’t help but notice a pair of beat-up, duct taped wrestling shoes on display with a plaque that reads “Ricky Gonzales; Team Captain; August 3, 1989-August 31, 2011” On the night of August 31, 2011, after a day of catching up and grilling out with the wrestling team, I dropped Ricky and a few of my other teammates at an ATM on Water Street before they were heading out to the bars. Two days later I received a phone call from my coach telling me that Ricky’s body had been found floating in the Chippewa River near lower campus.

I had so many questions. How could this have happened? Wasn’t he with the guys? I was only 19 so I couldn’t have joined them in the bars if I wanted to but I was left wondering...what if I had been with them? Would I have let him leave by himself? Did the guys even know he left? How did he end up in the river?

Ricky’s death left hundreds of UWEC students and faculty in a state of shock and disbelief. Ricky was the captain of the wrestling team, he was a good student, he brought light into every room he entered, he was supposed to be indestructible. He was not the kind of kid that you read about in the paper found dead in the river...not Ricky.

His death, like so many others, leaves plenty of room for victim blaming, friend blaming and conspiracy but all of that aside, the truth is Ricky’s death was an avoidable one. And while the details of that evening have never been pinpointed, one thing stands out: had Ricky not been walking alone that night he would likely still be alive today. But one thing that I believe also holds true is that everything happens for a reason and that Ricky did not leave in vain. His passing allowed the Blugold community to come together, it allowed the wrestling and student communities to bond over something bigger than ourselves. His legacy lives on in the lives of many wrestlers, classmates and community members. It is my hope that his memory will live on far beyond the individuals that he knew on campus.

That is why, this month the CASE office, in partnership with different Greek organizations and sports teams, will be running a “Be Smart. Buddy Up.” campaign in memory of Ricky to raise awareness of the importance of sticking together while going out. There are staggering statistics in regards to the number of deaths that occur each year simply because of people drowning, getting struck by cars or simply getting lost while going out. This is not solely a UWEC problem, a male problem and is not even limited
to a drinking problem…but there is no question that lives are lost every year due to people going out on their own after a night of heavy drinking.

The solution is a not a complicated one. You don’t need to find a walking buddy and hold hands while you cross the street or get one of those train leashes you see day cares use at the zoo (although…let’s be real...we all have a friend that could use one,) but what we do need to do is this: stick together, let someone in your group know if you are leaving with somebody, be smart and buddy up! And this doesn’t have to be limited to our own friend group. If you see anyone out who is struggling to get home (whether a guy or girl) help them out; get them a taxi, walk them home...let’s create a community of brothers and sisters who care for one another enough to keep each other safe.

You can look for CASE tables at these locations at the following times to pick up your “Be Smart. Buddy Up.” bracelet and join us in raising awareness:

...March 9th 11:00 am-2 pm, Centennial Hall

...March 11th 5:30 pm, Hilltop

...March 13th 11am-2pm in Centennial

Ricky’s life has profoundly shaped me as a wrestler and as a person. His life and passing has changed my appreciation for my family, my friends and my teammates. I am forever indebted to him and his family for the lasting impact that he has made in my life.

Further Information:

Footprints at the River’s Edge is a website that has been developed specifically to raise awareness of missing young men, many whose bodies were eventually found with high Blood Alcohol Contents in bodies of water. Ricky’s story can be found on their site here:

Read more about Ricky’s impact on campus here:
http://www.weau.com/home/headlines/Remembering_Ricky_memorial_held_for_student_who_drowned_in_river_129428943.html