

TRIM LINE

TRIM LINE TRIM LINE

GRACIE BENJAMIN

BY BROOKE FLETCHER

Beauty. A word that is used to describe the first interaction between a mother and her newborn child.

A word that is used to describe the joy of a graduate pursuing his dreams.

A word used, by nearly everyone who knew her, to describe **Gracie Benjamin**.

The night of December 2 rocked the entire community, as Benjamin, 12, left this earth. Along with three other friends, Benjamin was driving on I-526 when the back end of her car was hit by another driver.

"She waited, and then as she cut her wheel to get over, he cut his faster and he clipped our back right tire. I remember [the car] flipping once and then I blacked out. And then we hit land, and I remember waking up and reaching for Gracie and she wasn't there," one of the passengers, **Chloe Meli**, 12, said.

The car flipped over six times before landing in the woods, when the other passengers woke up and realized Benjamin was missing.

After a few hours of police interviews and EMS scans, **Meli**, **Olivia Andrews**, and **Lane Hartley** learned the reality of the tragic death of their best friend. Within a few hours, news spread all around Mount Pleasant.

"I just remember after the accident I got in the shower and I just didn't think it really happened to me. I looked at my hands, because they had cuts all over them, and that was kind of the reminder that what happened was real and it was just scary," Meli said.

Along with minor cuts, Meli learned she had also injured her back and lacerated her liver and esophagus, while Andrews dealt with symptoms related to a severe concussion.

"I didn't get out of the hospital until 3 in the morning and so we went over to [Gracie's mom's] around 7:30 a.m. the next morning. That was the first time I saw her since she had found out. Me, Chloe, Lane and their parents came over and honestly we all just kind of cried. We talked and it was just really sad," Andrews, 12, said.

In the days after the accident, the entire town was enveloped in heartbreak. Benjamin's closest friends struggled with coping but

found comfort in each other and the cherished memories each one held with Benjamin.

"We all just couldn't believe it; like, Gracie? No way she deserved this out of everyone. She's the last person you'd expect anything like this to happen to. Especially that way," Meli said.

"Gracie as a person to me is the most amazing, radiant and independent person I've ever met. Her beauty comes from her heart. The way she is always there for every person she knows always putting others before her. She's been through everything you can imagine, and she still was beyond positive every day she woke up, ready to get through the next day. I can't even begin to pick only a single time she was there for me throughout our almost 16 years of friendship but every time I did need her, she was right there by my side. Not many people can be that person but she was. Anyone who knew her should feel beyond lucky they got to experience that happiness and love she gave," **Baylor Shears**, 12, Benjamin's childhood best friend, said.

The tragedy surrounding Benjamin's sudden death called for a memorial much more than just a typical funeral service. Along with a viewing and memorial service at a local church, Benjamin's friends planned to honor her even more.

"Her balloon release was my sister's idea, because she saw how devastated I was. She got a group of people together and then a huge amount of people showed up [to the beach]. We just celebrated her life and sent balloons to her," Meli said.

In addition to a balloon release a few days after the accident, Benjamin's friends had also planned other trips and get-togethers that would further honor Gracie's memory by bringing all of her friends together in one place.

Immediately after December 2, **Bella Meli**, Chloe's sister, established a GoFundMe page to raise money for Benjamin's mother, who had also suffered the loss of her husband just a year before.

"We've raised, like, \$21,000 from so many people and it's so cool that people you don't even know are donating. It just shows that Gracie really impacted everyone," Andrews said.

Benjamin's mother, Pam, has since decided to use the money to start an organization in her daughter's name to honor other single mothers across the area.

"Basically it's a business and people bring you a Christmas tree and deliver it to your house and set it up and everything and it's going to come with a Gracie ornament," Meli said.

Benjamin's mother hopes to rekindle joy that is associated with Christmas time while still honoring her own late daughter's memory in the process.

That December night will not just be known as the night the Wando community lost Gracie Benjamin, but will also be known as the night the town learned just how precious life is. As a girl who always spent her time helping others first, a legacy full of the kindness and joy she always carried herself with.

"She's so beautiful. There's no other word to describe her except beautiful," Andrews said.

One poignant moment from the night stood out to Andrews, who recalls Benjamin speaking about her late father.

"Gracie was talking about how her dad had died a year or two ahead and the exact day she died, she goes '...I miss my dad. I miss him so much; like, I just want to see him again.' And then that whole entire day just seemed like it was set up to happen," Andrews said.

"We showed so much love towards each other and... for some reason that day will always stick with me because something was so weird about it and there was so much love and then it was just suddenly destroyed... She just kept talking about how much she missed her dad and how much she wanted to see him and everything, and then she got to see him that very day."

"Gracie was perfect. She was one of the prettiest people I know and also had a huge heart. Family was really important to Gracie ever since she was a kid and just her love for her family and friends was unconditional. She was an amazing person. Everyone misses her more than words can say but we know that she is looking over us, making sure everything is okay."
Katy Murphy, 12

"I've never heard one bad thing about Gracie. She always made me laugh so hard in Student Council while we slacked off. I miss her every day, but I feel her all around."
Claire Rodgers, 12

"Gracie Benjamin was someone you would meet and immediately have a connection with. Her laughter was contagious and her smile would make you smile. She was genuinely loving, caring, and beautiful inside and out. Once you got to know that crazy girl, you wouldn't be able to forget her. She is forever in my heart... I love you G."
Clara Gustafson, 12

"Gracie made an impact on everyone she met. She had an infectious smile and a contagious laugh, she could brighten your day with just a hug. She showed me what true kindness, compassion, and love is. She will always be missed."
Katie Massey, 12

"Our whole relationship seemed like a movie. I saw her at school and I knew that girl was special, and one day the stars aligned and we met. No one has ever made me feel so wanted, loved, and free. She made everyone around her light up, and brought smiles to everyone's face. Love is something I don't say a lot, but I loved that girl, and I wish I would have told her."
Hunter Higgins, 12

"Gracie was the sweetest soul, so beautiful in everything she did. She made me really happy as we started to become better friends. We all miss her so much, and will continue to live and grow in honor of her."
Eva Bourland, 12

"There is no one I'd rather have taken to prom than Gracie Benjamin. The girl with the best smile."
Patrick Fosberry, 12

"Gracie was someone you met and you never forget the way they made you feel. She always made sure that I had a smile on my face. You will always be in my heart. You shine so bright, G."
Bella Meli, 12

Customer is allowed to have objects outside of the margin.

TRIM LINE TRIM LINE

TRIM LINE TRIM LINE

Customer is allowed to have objects outside of the margin.

TRIM LINE TRIM LINE