

Victim Impact Statement

Your Honor,

My name is Michael Gaytko and with me today are my friends; Jordan Steffens, Garrett Rigdon, Katie Schroeder, Rachel Lashbrook and Andrew White.

On February 3, 2007 at approximately 3 o'clock in the morning, I was sleeping safely in a hotel room with my father in Wisconsin, dreaming of winning a hockey tournament that my team was participating in over that weekend. The other students standing beside me, were sleeping safely in their beds possibly dreaming about the things early teenagers think about; playing sports, snowmobiling in the freshly fallen snow, the latest video game, or agonizing about an upcoming test or school project that was due, or perhaps even about their first dance with someone other than a friend, or a first kiss.

We could have never imagined that in an old farmhouse, nestled in a quiet part of the Waseca countryside where we spent hours playing in the yard, our classmate, and more importantly, our best friend, Alec Kruger, lay dying in his parents' bed, the safest place a child should ever know.

In the middle of that night a monster came from out of a child's nightmare and took away our friend, took away our feelings of safety, challenged our values and beliefs about good and evil but more importantly took away any future that we may have had with our friend Alec.

We remember that day as if reliving a nightmare from which we will never awake. Phones calls from family and friends began circulating. One person was dead, they all were dead...the killer is still on the loose. Parents were frantically calling each other as they ran around their homes double checking to make sure their doors were all locked. And all the while we were texting or calling each other on cell phones, passing on any information, right or wrong, that we could get our hands on trying to comprehend, make sense of, and hoping that it was not true. We had all just seen Alec, been with him the night before, laughed with him at school or made plans for the weekend with him. Things like this do not happen here in our town, how could it happen again? We were just feeling safe again, old wounds were healing slowly after time, recovering from the horror of Callie Jo's murder not so many years ago.

That day we stayed glued to our TV's as pictures of the "murder scene" kept replaying across the screen. Can you imagine our pain, our horror, as the home and the yard of Alec our friend was shown being invaded by strangers in search of clues? Strangers from everywhere invaded our town. Camera crews, newspaper reporters, crime scene investigators were asking questions, leaking bits of horrific information about the scene. We could not even look at an area newspaper on our kitchen table without seeing a headline talking about the murders. Can you imagine being a child, whose only experience with death was probably a loss of a grandparent or a family pet, all natural in the order of life, having to comprehend such a violent, senseless loss of a friend? Well we can, we live with that memory every day.

We had to go back to school on Monday. The school provided us with counselors if needed. A room was set up for us to go to if we needed to leave class. We had to pass Alec's locker all day, forever would it be empty, a hard, cold steel reminder that he was gone. And, later in that week at our school a place where we learned and played, a place where wonderful teenage memories with Alec had been made, there was a funeral. While we were steps away in classes, the bodies of Alec and his father, Tracy, were lying in cold caskets in our gym. We had to concentrate as life was to go on, studying and trying to fit grieving in between the changes of class. The gym will not be a place where we remember learning to say hello to embrace the changes in our bodies, but a place where we would say goodbye to our friend amongst thousands of other mourners.

After the funeral, several of us took the long and painful journey on an unbearably cold February day out to the cemetery where Alec and Tracy were laid to rest. Noticeably absent and even more incomprehensible was the fact that his mother, Hilary, was missing. She had not been able to say goodbye, to hold her husband, to cradle her son, one last time. She was not given the opportunity for closure. She was lying in pieces in a hospital room far away from family and friends. We know what it feels like to be separated from our parents, we remember being dropped off at school for the first time clinging to the legs of our parents begging them not to leave us for fear they would never return. Alec will never come back, and we did not know the true impact of that realization as we clung to each other at the funeral, at choir concerts after that, at each others homes grieving his loss. Our parents tried to hold us, tried to comfort us, to take away the pain, but everywhere we turned memories of Alec surrounded us. We decorated his locker, the hallways, the lunchroom, even the school whiteboards boasted pictures of him. We could see images of him but realized painfully that we would never be able to touch him again.

As a memoriam the school retired his number in football, 73, his spot on the wrestling team at his weight was left empty and each sport recognized him that year and the next by wearing his number on their helmet or sleeve. Sports are to be a time of fun and competition but Alec's absence turned many moments during these events into more examples of his absence.

As we surrounded ourselves with memories of Alec we reached out to Hilary to comfort her as a means of healing ourselves. The entire Junior High made a recovery quilt and presented it to Hilary in the hospital, high school students wrote letters to us expressing their grief and support showing even those that did not know Alec well were touched and overwhelmed by the loss. We had to read these, and address those constantly invading questions by insensitive individuals who only wanted to know the gruesome details. To us he was our friend, to others he was just a headline story.

Time does not heal wounds this deep it simply changes the pain into something else. We are now young men and women, our feelings in view of the horrible realities of life and what has happened are now more realistic. The trial again brings up the same questions of why, why Alec, why Tracy. It is again everywhere we look, on the front page of every newspaper, details easily accessible on the internet. We can even access the 911 call, the final words of our best

friend forever immortalized as a hero who saved the life of his mother with the loss of his own. We are angry, we are sad, we are scared, and we are alone forever without Alec.

Alec was our best friend, he loved Tootsie Rolls, he and Tracy lived for snowmobiling, he was learning the guitar, mastering Smoke on the Water, and he had a long beautiful life ahead of him. But Michael Zabawa took him away from us. He left a hole in our lives with the holes he put in him. He is a monster. He deserves to never hear music again. He deserves to never feel the change of a season, to never enjoy the freedoms, the rights and the life he took from Alec and from us. There isn't a place that they could put him where his violent reach could still not touch our lives. He has destroyed so much in his path in only 10 minutes of his life, and they were the last 10 of Alec's.

Your Honor, please sentence Michael Zabawa to a life forever behind bars without ever having the option of parole. Your Honor, may Michael Zabawa never again see the light of day. Alec and Tracy were not given that option two years ago. Your Honor, you have the power to take Michael Zabawa's freedom from him, as he took it from Tracy and Alec. We ask this of you today.

I pray that there is enough of a glimmer of compassion in Michael that he spends the rest of his days in a dark and lonely place left to ponder the horrible, unprovoked acts which occurred by his hands... that took the dreams, hopes and futures of our friend Alec, his father Tracy, and forever changed the life of Hilary and the community of Waseca. May the Lord have compassion on his soul.

We thank you, your Honor and the court for the opportunity to be heard today.