

My Journey

I'm Tammy Slater also known as Jarret's mom. Jarret Austin Clark was my only son; my only child who fulfilled my life for 18 years, 1 month & 9 days.

We watched him grow up being involved in Boy Scouts, flag football, baseball, basketball, soccer, Jr. High football and HS weightlifting – whatever he tried we supported him. We have the memories of Jarret going through the “starting to like the girls” stage & the “learning to drive” days. His last 4 years of HS he took an interest in working out and was my motivator to work out as well. We would work out together at home; taking turns on the treadmill or lifting weights... usually seeing who could out-do who. Jarret would always win and had no mercy for me; he never ‘let’ me win; that was his competitive side. I keep telling myself I'm going to start working out again, but I haven't started yet. I know Jarret would be proud of me if I were to start exercising.

Jarret enjoyed snow skiing; especially with Eric since they would ski much faster than me and they would go through the trees & I would avoid the trees. He enjoyed water sports & could swim like a fish. He tried to teach me to snorkel in our pool but I wasn't a very good student. Jarret enjoyed spending time with his grandparents playing cards with them and shooting turtles & snakes at their pond... and of course he enjoyed hanging out with his friends.

Jarret was an easy going guy – except when his College or Pro Teams were losing then he'd get upset. But he took each day as it came and enjoyed that day to the fullest. He had a way of capturing your heart with his sense of humor, his personality and his charisma. He could always make you laugh and was just a fun kid to be around. No matter what kind of day I would have – or Eric; just a few minutes with Jarret and you would find yourself smiling & laughing.

Jarret's favorite:	NFL team:	Denver Broncos
	MBA team:	LA Lakers
	College Football:	FL Gators
	College B-Ball:	North Carolina Tar Heels

Jarret graduated from BAHS May 11, 2006. It was one of many proud moments we shared as a family and Jarret was on cloud 9; it was his time to shine. His plan after graduation was to join the Army. But, 3 days later on May 14, a new journey began for my family... Jarret was murdered at the age of 18.

It was Sunday, Mother's Day and we were supposed to go my parent's for lunch. Jarret was going with us but he had spent that Saturday night at Wahoo Bay camp site at Ft. Gibson Lake. He was supposed to be home at 10:00am that Sunday morning, but he never came home. Jarret was rarely late and if he knew he was going to be late he would always call us. Jarret was a trusting kid; maybe too trusting. He thought he could trust those that his was with that night; Brandon Hargrove, Brandon's g/f Courtney Manzer, Dayna Hargrove (Brandon's sister) and her b/f Tony Wallen.

Authorities believe Jarret flirted with Courtney and a fight broke out, turning into 2 against 1. In short, it's believed by the OSBI they knocked Jarret out, **thinking** they had killed him when in reality he was unconscious; but they tossed his body in the lake. The ME ruled his cause of death to be drowning which means he was alive when they put his body in the lake.

Our search for Jarret began the morning of May 14 with calls to his friends, to local hospitals, even jails, and of course the Wagoner Sheriff's Department. We kept calling Jarret's cell phone but it only went to voice mail. A massive search began and continued for 5 days. Then his body was recovered from the lake on May 18, 2006.

Those 5 days of searching were a journey all in itself. I never thought my family would be in that situation; searching for someone you love. You see 'it' on the news happening to other families, but you never think it could happen to your family. Some things I remember very vividly; some things I don't remember at all. I don't know how I would have made it through those days of searching without the support of my family, friends, my co-workers, the many volunteers who came out to support my family and help search for my son, and of course many of Jarret's friends.

Another part of our journey was going through a grand jury process in December 2008 in Wagoner County. Dealing with the judicial system & the hoops you have to jump through can be very tiring; physically &

emotionally. But during that process we again had the support of family, friends, co-workers; even strangers volunteered as we had to gather the signatures in order to even have the grand jury. The verdict was no indictment due to lack of evidence. But as a parent I felt it was a process well worth our time and efforts and something we had to do for Jarret.

Jarret being murdered is another part of this journey that I find a huge challenge to deal with; knowing who took Jarret's life and knowing they are not being held accountable. I go through mixed emotions. I'm angry at those responsible for Jarret's death. I'm angry with the justice system and how Jarret's case was handled and how politics played a part. I'm hurt & heart-broken because my son doesn't get to continue on with his life and live out his dreams while they do. I try to keep reminding myself what others have told me; Justice will be served in the end.

Then, there's the funeral part of the journey. Selecting the casket, the songs, the clothes; so many details to deal with while you're in a fog. Again, the support of my family and friends were there to help get through that time as well. I remember going to the funeral home for visitation, there were 25-30 of Jarret's friends and we meet at our house and caravanned from BA to the funeral home in Muskogee. Some wanted to have their private moment with Jarret which I thought was really cool. Some went in as groups to say their final goodbyes. It showed me how much my son meant to them. We all wrote letters to Jarret and those letters went with him. Over 400 students attended his funeral. That also meant a lot to me; it tells me Jarret touched a lot of lives. Even Army Sergeant Spain; the recruiting officer attended his funeral.

I've never had to go through anything like this before. Some days are hard; some days are harder. Some days I feel I have a grip on this new journey while other days I wonder if I'll ever come to terms with this journey. I continue to take each day as it comes. It's been a little over 5 years and still at some point during the day; I find myself crying. Seeing something – like a young man w/Jarret's build or haircut, hearing something – like a young man's voice saying “hey Mom”, whatever triggers the tears; I've learned it's okay to cry anywhere; anytime. I do try to take myself to that ‘happy place’ of memories. It's those memories that help me get through each day and knowing I'll see Jarret again when I cross over. In fact; one great memory that I hold on to is that Saturday evening before Jarret left our house. He had given me flowers for my Mother's Day which he arranged in a vase all

on his own (and I still have those flowers in that vase; dried out flowers but I still treasure) but as he headed out the door he turns around, looks at Eric and me and says... “love you guys”. Those were our last words as a family.

For me, this is an on-going journey. I’ll never get over the death of my son but I try to find ways and do things that help me get through each day.

- I kinda went crazy with his photos. I scanned hundreds of photos and framed them all. I even framed some of his handwritten school papers and his workout routines. Luckily, Hobby Lobby was having a really good sale on frames.
- I talk to Jarret – all the time; no matter where I am but especially in my car since he was like my main passenger (before he started driving) and we shared lots of conversations in my car. Driving to my parents is an hour drive one way; so that gave Jarret & me 2 good hours of talking time ... plus we’d sing together too. ☺
- I also write to Jarret; I write poems to Jarret and about Jarret. I’ll even write some notes and then just throw them away.
- This year I helped coordinate the National Day of Remembrance for Murder Victims that was held Sept 26th in Muskogee. Families came together to talk about their loved ones and we all released balloons in their memory. September 25th is the National Day but we had our ceremony on the 26th and close to 100 people attended.
- We’ve hung a Christmas ornament at “The Trees of Honor and Remembrance for Victims of Violent Crime” at the Van Trease Performing Arts Center at TCC Southeast Campus.
- We’ve planted trees in honor of his memory; one at Wahoo Bay, one at BAHS and one in Ft. Collins, CO at the Library Park.
- We’ve dedicated a picnic bench to the BAHS with his name recessed in the table top.

- We've planted flowers at La Fortune Park in honor of murder victims.
 - Its things like that that makes me feel like a part of Jarret does live on and for me it also plays a huge part in my healing process. I feel like I'm doing something in honor of my son.
- I look forward to receiving the CF Newsletter and reading the poems and stories that other parents share about their sons/daughters/ and grandchildren. I find comfort through the newsletter and it also reminds me that I'm not the only one on this journey. CF plays a huge part in the healing process.
- Another support group I have is where I work. There are several moms that share my same bond and I can go to them at any time. They know what it's like to bury a child. If one of us is having a bad day; we're there for each other. For me, it's good to connect with those who can relate.
- We also decorate Jarret's grave for lots of occasions. He loved the 4th of July so we always decorate for that. We decorate for Valentines, his birthday, Thanksgiving & Christmas. I make floral arrangements to represent his Bronco team during football season & his basketball team during March Madness.

Shortly after Jarret was killed & as I began to talk with other moms who have lost a child, they told me how hard the 'first' everything would be. They were right; it was. The first Mother's Day, Father's Day, Jarret's birthday, every holiday, even our first family vacation – just the 'first' everything was difficult. I think that first year I was still in a fog and floated through everything. For Jarret's 19th birthday we had 50+ people at our house and had cake, ice cream and released balloons. But, for some reason now, his birthdays & the holidays seem to hit me a little harder. Even my own birthdays are somewhat sad because Jarret isn't here to help celebrate and to make jokes about me getting older. It's like the fog is gone and the reality has sunk in; there are no more birthdays and holidays with Jarret. Even tho we still celebrate, I think we all know it's not the same as when they were here. Luckily, I have a little over 18 yrs of great memories that I go back to – and those memories help get me through those difficult times.

I prefer to be out of town during holidays so if we go anywhere we always take key chains which have Jarret's DOB and Angel Date along with his website on them. We leave those key chains in places like hanging from tree branches, leaving on park benches, we've even buried some things in the sand in Maui under a palm tree; one place that Jarret always wanted to visit. Jarret also talked about going to Las Vegas for his 21st birthday so...we went to Las Vegas for his 21st birthday. If we don't leave town, then maybe for his birthday we'll have friends over to release balloons or we'll take a few of his friends out for lunch to celebrate Jarret's birthday. If we're in town for Mother's Day I like to take a sonic burger and go to his picnic table at the HS. Sonic was one of Jarret's favorite places.

Going through this journey makes me think about the future. It's been a little over 5 years and I can't imagine what another 10-20-30 more years will be like. The thought of growing older without Jarret and grandkids around saddens me. I always thought I would get to watch him marry and have his own family. I always thought we would take some family vacations together. I always thought Jarret & grandkids would be there as Eric & I move on into our elderly years.

Since Jarret was my only child, I have that fear of the dreaded question as I meet new people - "How many children do you have?" or "do you have children?" I can't & won't say... "no I don't have any". It may be more comfortable for those asking but it wouldn't be fair to Jarret. I try to keep in mind they don't know what happened to my son and look at it as an opportunity to tell them about Jarret and what a great son he was.

During this journey I find myself thinking about Jarret and what his journey is like now. This may sound kinda silly -- but I'm always wondering 'what's he doing'. I believe in my heart that he's in a happy place knowing no pain, no sorrow, and no worries. He used to love that song... "Don't worry, Be Happy" and I believe he is happy. Jarret was a happy-go-lucky type person. I believe he's watching down over me; probably even laughing at times at some of the things I do; like he used to do with me in his silly goofy ways. I miss his laughter so much but know I'll hear it again. I watch his video to hear that laughter, hear his voice and see his smile. Thinking of how Jarret lived his life makes me want to try and continue to enjoy life to the fullest like Jarret did.

Everyone's journey is different; everyone's journey is their own. I need to talk about Jarret and visit the cemetery. I need to be surrounded by photos of Jarret and see some of his things. I even wear a ring he gave me when he was in 5th grade; he said he didn't have a girlfriend to give it to so he gave it to me. Although it came out of a quarter machine, it means the world to me.

Everyone has to find what works for them to get through the day. What works for one may not work for the next person. But we all share the same bond; we all miss our sons, our daughters or our grandchildren. It doesn't matter how they died; it doesn't matter how long it's been... we share the same pain and the same sadness – we miss them. But, I believe we also share that same assurance of knowing we'll see them again.

Thanks for letting me share about my son; Jarret.

(Tammy shared her journey with the Tulsa Compassionate Friends at the October 13th, 2011 meeting)