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## **Forgiveness eases mom's pain**

DUI felon addresses students about fatal decision | Renee Napier, Eric Smallridge share stage, tears at Gulf Breeze HS

By Joe Culpepper

Originally published April 29, 2010



Photo by Joe Culpepper/  
Gulf Breeze News

Eric Smallridge talks about the selfish decision he made to drive while drunk on May 11, 2002 and cause the accident that killed the daughter of Renee Napier (seated).

Call it the ultimate act of forgiveness.

Former Pensacola Beach resident Renee Napier returned to the area last Thursday to publicly express her forgiveness to Eric Smallridge, who was convicted in the 2002 DUI death of Napier's daughter, Meagan, 20, and a friend, Lisa Dickson, 20.

Smallridge, then 24, left Pensacola Beach in the predawn hours of May 11, 2002 after a day and night of drinking. His speeding jeep slammed into a four-door Mazda driven by Dickson with Meagan Napier in the passenger seat on U.S. Highway 98 in the heart of Gulf Breeze. The impact sent the car careening into the median, and broadside impact with a tree killed both girls.

Smallridge, a college student and Eagle Scout, was sentenced to 22 years in prison. In 2006, at the request of the deceased girls' families, Smallridge's sentence was reduced to 11 years. He will be eligible for release in November 2012.

Renee Napier and Smallridge appeared publicly together for the first time last Thursday at Gulf Breeze High School, where they delivered a powerful, highly emotional presentation about the dangers of drunken driving. The assembly program for junior and senior students was held two days before prom in hopes of preventing a similar tragedy.

Renee Napier spoke eloquently about forgiveness and the ability that gave her to move on with her life.

"I could be angry, hateful and bitter," Napier said in the darkened GBHS gym. "But I didn't want to live my life that way. There was no way I could move on and live a happy life without forgiving Eric.

"I've grown to love him and his family. They have been so supportive. This isn't about me anymore. This is about Meagan and Lisa."

Minutes later, a shackled Smallridge was led into the gym by Santa Rosa County Sheriff Wendell Hall and Sgt. Scott Haines. Wearing a light-blue prison uniform, his handcuffs were unlocked so he could hold the microphone. Smallridge spent the next 10 minutes telling his life story and how one terrible lapse in judgment resulted in two deaths and altered many people's lives forever.



GBN file photo

The accident scene in the median of Gulf Breeze Parkway on May 11, 2002 that claimed the lives of Meagan Napier and Lisa Dickson.



Photo by Joe Culpepper/  
Gulf Breeze News

Life Flight arrives to pick up the injured during a mock drill at Dolphin Stadium last Thursday. GBHS student Matt Dannheisser is extricated from a wrecked car by Gulf Breeze Fire & Rescue responders during a DUI simulation. GBHS students last week examine the car in which two innocent girls were killed in 2002 as the result of a drunken driver.

"Honestly, I expected to be booed today," Smallridge, 31, told students who applauded politely before he began his address. "I can tell you exactly what it feels like to be the drunk driver that took somebody's life. I can't convince anybody not to (drink and drive), but you can learn from my mistake, hopefully, and decide for yourself not to make the same decision I made.

"I drank and drove way too many times before, and nothing ever happened. I was so selfish because I never considered what effect drinking and driving could have on someone other than me. I made a bad decision, and now two young people are dead because of it."

Members of the Napier and Dickson families looked on with students as a video presentation set to the haunting music of 'The Reason' by Hoobastank accompanied photographs from the victims' and Smallridge's lives. Some students cried openly; others choked back tears.

Nearby, Smallridge sat next to Renee Napier, his eyes welled with tears. Napier comforted Smallridge before he was rehandcuffed and led away by authorities. He's serving his sentence at the Bay Correctional Facility in Panama City.

Minutes later, students were sent to the football stadium to witness a DUI accident simulation sponsored by GBHS' Students Against Destructive Decisions that included Gulf Breeze Fire and Rescue, Gulf Breeze Police and Baptist

Healthcare's LifeFlight helicopter. On the route to the stadium, the crumpled Mazda car in which Meagan Napier and Lisa Dickson lost their lives sat on a trailer. One student openly wept as she paused to study the vehicle.

Culpepper, Joe "Forgiveness eases mom's pain." *GulfBreezeNews.com*. 29 April 2010. Newspaper on-line. Available from [http://www.gulfbreezenews.com/news/2010-04-29/Community/Forgiveness\\_eases\\_moms\\_pain.html](http://www.gulfbreezenews.com/news/2010-04-29/Community/Forgiveness_eases_moms_pain.html)