

# From the Bitterest Pill, Gifts of Life

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TIMOTHY Michael Strain, the youngest of their three sons, had always been a gift to his parents, Beverly and Bernie Strain.

His last gift - the organs from his body - went to others.

The parents find solace in that, feeling that a grain of good emerged from a pound of pain. Bernie's red-rimmed eyes well up as he shows me the organ-donor certificate honoring the life-giving gift from his son.

The shock of losing the baby of the family - the good boy, the animal-lover, the athlete - was seismic. Few parental traumas are worse than burying a child, but the how of Timmy's death multiplied the weight of the grief: He was killed by a well-meaning, but horribly misguided, adult.

Timmy's oldest brother, Brian, 26, is a staff sergeant in the U.S. Air Force who enlisted after 9/11 and works in special operations here and overseas. Middle brother, Andrew, 23, a Penn State graduate, is a financial adviser. The brothers grew up in Manayunk, "the Polish Poconos," Bernie jokes.

Were they close?

A few years ago, Beverly, who had been a registered nurse, became seriously ill with a blood disorder, and Brian became Timmy's legal guardian so the youngest brother could live with him. Brian was stationed in Germany and Timmy did his junior and senior years at Ramstein American H.S.

"He really wanted to go," says Beverly. "I didn't want him to go, Bernie didn't want him to go, but Brian insisted."

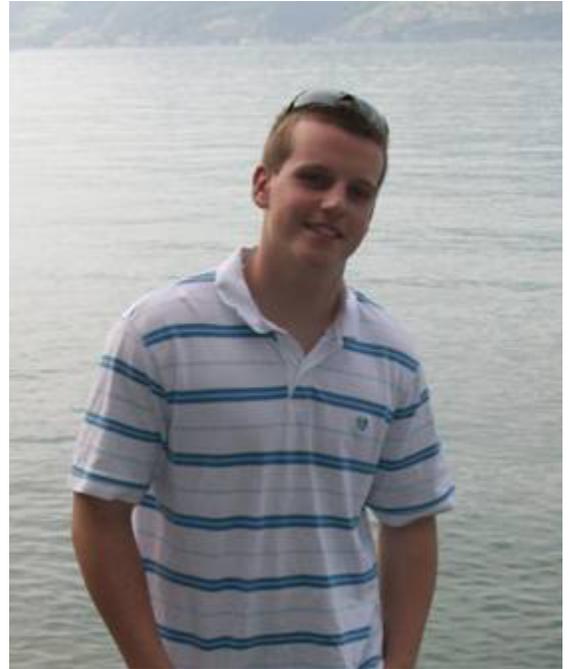
Living abroad made for a glorious life and learning experience for Timmy, who came back last summer and worked for money to pay for tuition at Philadelphia Community College. He wanted to be a veterinarian.

In August, while working for a landscaping company, his hands were seriously burned on the muffler of a gas-powered lawn mower. Timmy was driven to a nearby doctor, and Bernie rushed to be with his son.

"The palms of his hands looked like a big blister, like bubble wrap, and he was in severe pain," Bernie says.

The doctor treated and wrapped the wounds and wrote a prescription for Tylenol with codeine. A couple of days later, on Wednesday, Aug. 5, Beverly took Timmy to St. Christopher's burn center, where they redressed the wounds and discussed a possible skin graft. Timmy was still in pain and they wanted him back on Monday. Beverly wanted Timmy to come with her, but he went home with his girlfriend, who lived with her mother. Timmy, 18, wanted to see his friends, eat wings and play cards that night.

Around 11 p.m., he phoned home. Beverly asked him to come home, but Timmy, who sounded fine, decided to stay.



He told his mom he loved her and hung up.

Those were his last words to his mother.

Later that night, because his girlfriend's mother knew that Timmy was in pain, she gave him two painkilling tablets prescribed for her.

Timmy took them, and died.

"She killed my kid by giving him something out of her medicine cabinet," growls Beverly, and because criminal charges may follow, I am not naming the mother.

As parents raising boys in the '90s, the Strains knew that kids raided home medicine chests to get high on whatever they found. This wasn't what killed Timmy, but still they started to think. And then Bernie, an investigator for the state Treasury Department, decided to act.

The Strains' premise is two-fold: A lot of drugs in the medicine chest shouldn't be there, and there's no good method of disposal. The Strains think there should be, and returning drugs to the pharmacy is logical.

"If you can get rid of oil, bottles and cans properly, why can't there be a place to dispose of prescription drugs properly?" Bernie asks. He wants such a place to exist and wants the enabling legislation to be called Timmy's Law.

He went to Councilwoman Blondell Reynolds-Brown, who is interested and asked the law department to look into whether the city has authority to regulate an industry that falls under the jurisdiction of the Food & Drug Administration.

Bernie then met with U.S. Sen. Bob Casey, who understood the problem but warned Bernie that getting legislation passed is more crock pot than microwave. Casey told me that he's asking about sidestepping the legislative slog through regulation or by inviting Big Pharma in to talk about voluntary drug take-backs.