

**Change slow, but Tina's mom keeps pushing:  
Life didn't end for Chrissy Burbank when it ended for her 11-year-old daughter Tina. As she tries to force the issues surrounding auto crime, Chrissy tells Peter Clough that she hopes Tina is looking down -- and smiling**

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By his 15th birthday, the young heroin addict and car thief was destined to kill someone, somewhere on the roads of the Lower Mainland.

No one was able to stop him. It was just a matter of when someone would die -- and who.

In a two-month spree of violence, theft and joyriding in the spring of 2000, the teenager and his pals were chased at high speed by Surrey RCMP on five different occasions. Sometimes they were caught, but most of the time they managed to ditch their stolen cars -- they loved those Toyotas -- and escape on foot.

The young man's social workers, having watched him grow up in a culture of drugs, violence and domestic abuse, were hardly surprised by the sudden explosion of criminal behaviour.

His mother was a heroin addict and a thief. His stepfather had a record of more than 40 criminal convictions. His uncle was doing time for manslaughter. At seven, the boy was in trouble at school for fighting. At 14, he was using crack, Demerol and heroin and supporting his habit by breaking into houses.

The mix became deadly the day he discovered the thrill of driving other people's cars.

On July 14, 2000 -- just turned 15 and out on bail for auto theft and beating someone up -- he checked himself into a drug addiction clinic. He was supposed to stay for a week but left the following day complaining that the program was too tough, that there were too many rules.

On July 16, he and his friend, two years older, went to White Rock. A court heard later that they needed to "settle a debt" and buy heroin. They returned home in a stolen Toyota Cressida.

At 72nd Street and Hall Road in Surrey, an RCMP constable, alarmed by the 15-year-old's driving, put her lights on and signalled him to pull over.

The kid stopped, but as the officer opened her door to get out, he hit the gas.

The constable gave chase, reaching speeds of 80 km/h. She could not keep up with the boy behind the wheel. He drove through traffic signs as though they didn't exist.

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In her sprawling Surrey garden, Chrissy Burbank explains how she finds peace of mind tending her flowers and thinking about the daughter she lost that day five years ago.

She says Tina, who was 11 when she died, would've been proud of the work she's done -- not only in the garden, but with Angels in Heaven, a support group for parents who've lost children as the result of criminal acts. Tina's mom has also campaigned for reforms to Canada's Youth Criminal Justice Act, for a tougher and more effective approach to B.C.'s auto theft epidemic and for greater controls on high-speed police pursuits.

Chrissy and Trent Burbank run West Coast Extractions, a successful marine cleaning company. Tina, their first child, had blossomed into a dynamic young woman who was one step away from a black belt in taekwondo and who talked seriously about competing for Canada in the Olympics. "It was just all sports for her," says Chrissy. "I mean, she could skateboard on rails. She wasn't into Barbies or any girlie things. It was all competing with the boys."

She laughs at how Tina could sidekick her dad to the ground -- and how she amazed everyone the day before her death by shooting a hole-in-one at a company golf tournament.

Trent was working on a contract aboard a cruise ship up in Alaska. It was a beautiful day and Chrissy and Tina decided on the spur of the moment to spend the afternoon at Bear Creek Park. Tina and her little brother Erik, still a toddler, were thrilled when mom invited grandma and grandpa along.

"We had a great day," Chrissy recalls. "We went on the train and the kids went in the water park. Erik and Tina kept wanting to go on the train one more time. I said, 'No, we've got to get home.'"

It's a memory she treasures -- but it's also one of many "what-ifs" that have tortured her since. If only she had let the kids go on one more ride. If only they'd taken a different route home.

The young offender from the other side of town was high on heroin as he flew through one intersection after the next, pursued by the law.

Chrissy was a couple of blocks from dropping her parents off at their home when they were hit. All she remembers is a flash of light. The family's SUV was slammed broadside by the stolen car, moving so fast that it toppled a telephone pole on the rebound. Their vehicle came to rest on the lawn of a nearby house.

The elderly owner of the home was watering his garden and witnessed the tragedy. Weeks after the accident, Chrissy got to know him because his lawn had become a shrine to her daughter.

"People would go by with poems or teddy bears," she says. "Every time he opened his door to me he'd say, 'Chrissy, I can't handle this any more. Every morning I go out there and I see your daughter trying to breathe and everything comes back.' He had to sell his house and move because he just couldn't take it."

Tina's little brother sustained minor injuries. Chrissy explains that Erik, now in Grade 3, has found it hard to adjust to the reality of his sister's death. So have her parents who, like Chrissy, are also still dealing with physical injuries. "My dad used to golf every day and enjoy life, and he's in a wheelchair now, taking lots of medication," she says. "It's been very difficult for them. Tina had her own room at their place. She'd go there at least twice a week."

Yet the family and Tina's friends pulled together. The schools she went to named athletic awards in her honour. Every year, Chrissy takes great comfort and pride in handing them out.

"I thought right after the accident that my life was never going to get back to any kind of normalcy," says Chrissy. "But you have to fight to get your life back. You have to say that you're going to survive, that you want to enjoy life 150 per cent, you want to love the people and the friends who are involved in your life and you don't want to go through the rest of your life hurting.

"You can't go back, so you may as well go forward."

As a founding member of Angels in Heaven, she knows that not every family is able to cope with having their lives turned upside down. There are about 30 parents in the group who have lost children through criminal acts -- including several who died as the result of other children getting behind the wheels of stolen cars.

"A lot of husbands and wives don't stay together," she says. "I wish I could say that our support group helped people 100 per cent of the time but it doesn't. Some of the families turn to alcohol and drugs. Some of them even turn to crime because they just don't care any more."

While dealing with her daughter's death, Chrissy and her husband organized a petition calling for youths involved in serious crime to be dealt with in adult court. But she points out that she has never held a personal grudge against the teenager who robbed her of so much.

"I believe he didn't intend to go out and kill someone that day," she says. "He was just going for a joyride. I don't think he understood the consequences at that point. At least that's what I was led to believe."

At his trial in youth court, the Burbank family heard how the teenager had "survived" his childhood among crooks and drug addicts. Psychological reports referred to a "chaotic domestic situation" and described the boy as being unduly vulnerable to the pressure of his delinquent peers.

The young offender's lawyer said he had at times excelled in the classroom and had talked seriously about going to BCIT to take welding. He saw himself settling down and starting a family of his own. The lawyer described him as "a good kid turned bad by all of the circumstances that surrounded him" and referred to a psychological report that concluded: "It was almost inevitable in those circumstances that something like this may occur."

Along with the Burbank family's victim impact statements, the boy was shown photographs of Tina living her life. Chrissy made a point of slipping in one of her daughter lying in her coffin.

The boy wrote the Burbank family a letter:

"You probably don't even want to look at me, let alone hear what I have to say. If I were you I would feel the same way and I'm sure nothing I can say or do will ever change that but I just want you to know that I am sorry and if there was any way that I could have given my life for your daughter's I would have done it in a heartbeat.

"I know if I did not take that car that day none of this would have happened but I did and it did happen and I could say I'm sorry 10,000 times and it still won't change that and I'm sure that you think I'm just some punk kid that thinks this is just some joke or something but I don't and I do have a heart and I do feel pain and sorry for what happened but I'm sure this is hurting you to read this as much as it's hurting me to write it."

He was sentenced to 26 months in jail. Afterwards, Chrissy Burbank said the sentence seemed reasonable and sounded optimistic that the boy might somehow get his life together. Two years later she learned that he'd been released early and, within weeks, was stealing cars and leading police on dangerous high-speed chases through the streets of Surrey. In one incident, he almost slammed into an RCMP cruiser.

"When I heard about it, it was like a slap in the face," she says. "The hopes that I had for him turning his life around were shattered. At that point, that's when you could say I lost respect for him. But I still don't waste my time hating him or holding a grudge. He's going to suffer now for what he's done to other people. It's not worth being angry at him. He's going to be found in a ditch dead one day or he's going to spend his life in jail. He's not actually going to know what it's like to enjoy life."

Last September, a judge declared the young man, then 19, "a danger to the public" and sentenced him to 44 months in jail for two vehicle thefts. One of the incidents was described by the crown prosecutor as "distressingly similar" to the one that took the life of Tina Burbank.

He also pleaded guilty this year, along with two other accused men, to manslaughter in the death of a Surrey resident last year. Although he's now an adult, the Youth Criminal Justice Act makes it illegal to identify the man in any media coverage that refers to crimes he committed as a youth. Chrissy says his quick return to old patterns of behaviour is strong evidence that lenient jail sentences and well-intended rehabilitation programs don't work. She says Canada's justice system failed her family.

"I thought that any human being, once you've taken someone's life, especially an innocent person, you would think you'd want to do anything to change your ways," she says. "I believe they should be doing boot camp and they should be doing more in the community to make them realize what life is all about."

She says she would be just as happy if she never heard about the guy who killed her daughter ever again.

Her focus right now is on a civil action she has launched against the RCMP, in which she claims police were partly to blame for Tina's death by conducting a high-speed pursuit. She spent last week in B.C. Supreme Court; a judgment is not expected for another week or two.

Chrissy says she wants to ensure that her daughter's death was not in vain.

"If she's up there in heaven -- which she is -- I just want her to be proud of me and know that I'm not going to ever forget her," she says.

Chrissy and Trent Burbank have one other new responsibility. Since losing Tina, they have brought a new son, Ethan, into the world. He's now two.

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