



**CO POISONING
AWARENESS and
PREVENTION**

WHAT CAN YOU DO?

*ANSWER: Whatever you feel
a need and passion to
do.....*

Never have I experienced such emotional and mental confusion, anger to rage, helplessness and an intense sense of loss that consumed me when, three months after my brother Skip's death, I spoke with the attending coroner – her final and shocking conclusion of his cause of death was not a heart attack, as we believed up until that time, but **CARBON MONOXIDE POISONING!!!!!!!!!!**



He had returned from his ½ hour daily morning swim surrounded by fresh air, sunshine and beautiful Shasta Lake. He was also unknowingly surrounded by something very deadly. The boat engine was running and when he swam to the back of the boat he entered an extremely dense pocket of carbon monoxide. Skip's life was snuffed out almost instantly. His CO level was 89.3%!!!!!!

The key word here is “*unknowingly*”. That has been and will continue to be my nemesis..... How could this “silent killer” that is emitted from marine engines and generators be spewing out poison and the boating public be totally unaware????????? At no time had any of my family been educated about the danger of CO poisoning. Four generations of avid boaters.....

WHY????????? HOW COULD THIS BE????? WHY DIDN'T WE KNOW?????

Being a “need to know” person and tormented by the above questions I started to investigate and research the CO/boating issue. What an amazing journey it has been! My personal way of honoring my brother's life is to work to prevent others from dying this way. There are family members who want “to do something” but just don't know what to do. I don't have all the answers, but I can share with you what I did. Maybe it will give you some ideas.

I began calling boating safety organizations to gather more information. One call led to another, to another, to another. Over and over I was told “We have never heard of this” and was referred to another group. I was ultimately put in contact with Jane McCammon and Dr. Robert Baron - the original pioneers that pursued and studied the “under recognized epidemic” of CO poisonings. They welcomed my questions, provided me with answers, AND invited me to tell my brother's story at the International Boating and Water Safety Summit. Yes, of course, I can do that!!

I remember standing at the back of the auditorium thinking...“Good grief, what am I doing, will I embarrass them, I'm far from being a public speaker.” Then I realized something vital. This

was in no way about me. It didn't matter what I was wearing, how I stood, if I stammered. All that mattered was that two very well educated, professional people had trust in me to tell Skip's Story and hopefully enlighten this varied gathering of boating hierarchy as to how devastating a CO poisoning is. My job was to let them know that it needs to be addressed and that they should put CO at the top of all their "to do" lists. This made it so much easier to step up to the podium.

Armed with information from Jane and Dr. Baron, I convinced a local non-profit boating organization to work with me in applying for a grant from BoatUS. My job was to come up with an idea for the way to use the grant money to promote CO awareness. I decided to try for money to do a Public Service Announcement (PSA).

I had been told that Al Unser, Sr. had been poisoned by CO while attempting to untangle ropes beneath his houseboat. Thankfully, Mr. Unser survived, although he says there are parts of that day he cannot remember. I had been given his phone number and struggled for several days getting up the courage to call. Then it dawned on me that he was not going to call ME....so call I did. When I explained the reason for my contacting him, he told me about his personal experience and his lack of knowing the danger he had been in. It was a very warm, compassionate, and memorable conversation. At the end of our talk he said, "Claire, you get the grant and I'll do the PSA." Joined by a Canadian film producer, Duel Media, we were awarded a BoatUS grant. The PSA, plus a Speed Channel segment, were completed that year, and aired on cable channels in the US and Canada.

We were awarded another grant from BoatUS the following year. With this we created and displayed two billboards promoting CO awareness and safe boating classes. Two consecutive grants from BoatUS!!!!!!

But what do I do every day??? I continue to gather technical information as it develops. I teach at local boating safety classes. I speak at boating safety seminars and gatherings. I work as a volunteer on the Double Angel Foundation CO Awareness Committee. I do media interviews whenever I am asked, and sometimes I inspire those media stories by calling up reporters to let them know about the issue. And I provide input to legislators who are willing to address this important issue. I have no doubt that my brother Skip is proud to have his name in California Bill AB2222.

There have been some hurtful and frustrating things along the way. A boat manufacturer told me, and I quote: "your brother was stupid". That is stated out of context but his position was clear.

Another incident that rocked me was when a lake patrol officer stated, after I told him my brother died behind his boat from CO poisoning and I quote again, "that is impossible". He said that looking directly at me – and he believed it. This lake patrol officer's lack of CO education was quite obvious. And his duty is to come to a boater's rescue. Aha, another area that needs work.....

If you have lost a child (in the case of the Dixey family – two children), a son or daughter, a mother or father, a brother or sister, a friend, it is so painful knowing all these deaths were preventable.... I have had the pleasure of speaking with family members of CO victims during the years since Skip died. Each of them is dealing with their personal tragedy as differently as their individual experiences. And each of them wanting to do something, but not knowing what to do.

A father who lost his son told me he just cannot deal with the mention of CO. It makes it more and more unbearable for him. He cannot move forward because his son's cause of death is so heart breaking. I'm sure that many families feel that way. Because I do too, many times.

I still can't wrap my brain around my brother's cause of death. I still have days of "this is way too painful, it keeps Skip's death right in front of me 24 hours a day, 7 days a week....." Then someone/something pops into my head. Like my memory of a beautiful 12 year old girl who told me in a safe boating class that she barefoot skied pulled by a 10 foot rope behind her family boat. "Is that dangerous?" she asked. I am hoping her family has made changes in their skiing practices – and just maybe – she has been spared a CO poisoning.

The fact that millions of boaters are still unaware haunts me and I have to try – something.

For me, being part of this incredible journey of education and prevention eases the pain a little. And always, a voice inside me says.... "Let's continue, we must continue."

By
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