

Zachary's Story

Happy Birthday Meatball

I'd like to share my story with you. My son, Zachary, was born March 4th, 2004, and he passed May 24th 2005. His 467 days on Earth were a blessing. His life has inspired strength. I want Zachary to be remembered for the beautiful, innocent child that he was. Through his story, I hope to bring awareness.

From the very beginning, he lived up to his nickname, Meatball. He came into this world weighing 10 pounds 11 ounces. Zachary was my second child.

Zachary's father decided he didn't want another child with me, and he left when I was 38 weeks pregnant. Four weeks later, Zach was finally on his way. I went into the hospital with fear, but I left the hospital with hope. Having Zachary in one arm and McKenzy, my 2-year-old daughter, in the other, I remember the feeling of fulfillment. I knew the road ahead was going to be hard, but I had faith that we would all be okay.

Everyone used to tell me how lucky I was. Zach was always such an angel. He had that deep belly laugh. When he was happy, he used to smile with his eyes. He was just the best baby. The only time I remember him getting upset is when he knew his food was coming. I couldn't make it fast enough. He liked to have two fists full of food, and a mouth full.

Zachary got to have his first Easter, Halloween, Thanksgiving, Christmas, and birthday, each one spent with family, and filled with love. Little did we know each would be his last. All of our lives were about to change.

I began dating again, and I met Justin. He had two children of his own. He presented himself as a nice person. He was very kind to me and my children, or so I thought.

I picked up Zachary from daycare, and I was told that he had a slight fever and he needed to stay home the following day. This was the beginning of the chain of events that changed my life. Justin offered to help me by staying home with Zach for me. I was relieved for the help. I was out of work leave and out of money. I gladly accepted. He promised me that he would be okay taking care of him. I'm normally not the kind of mom who accepts help or asks anyone to watch my kids, but I felt like I was in a bind.

McKenzy, who was also sick, and Zach were both home in the care of Justin. I remember coming home from work that day and Zach was fussy. It was so unlike him because he was normally such a pleasant baby. He was uncomfortable and he didn't want to eat. Justin said he

was okay all day. I called the doctor for advice and they reassured me that it sounded like the stomach bug that was going around. I was given directions and I followed them.

That weekend McKenzy and Zach's father came into town and wanted to see the kids. I offered him my couch and let him spend time with the kids. We both noticed that Zach was still feeling under the weather. We gave him a bath and noticed a bruise on his head. I didn't remember him falling, but he was just at the age of learning to walk. I called the doctor again. She told me that it was probably fine, that he was a toddler and they fall. Put some ice on it and he'll be okay. We continued the weekend. McKenzy was recovering and beginning to feel better but Zach was not.

Monday came around. I went to work and McKenzy and Zach's father stayed with the kids before he had to leave. I got out of work early and we got to spend the rest of the afternoon together. We were a whole family one last time. We took the kids outside to play and have fun. Zach didn't really want to. He wasn't complaining about it, but he wasn't really walking around. I put Zachary to bed that night just like it was any other night. I gave him a kiss and then tucked him in.

The next morning, I got McKenzy up and ready. She went back to daycare but Zach still didn't feel well. I remember thinking, "I'd better not wake him. He really needs his sleep." I said that I was going to call the doctor that day if he wasn't feeling better.

I went to work and I called to check on him during my first break. Justin answered and said that Zach hadn't woken up yet. It was 10, and that didn't seem right. He said that he tried, but he just wasn't waking up. I thought he must have been really drained. I called my mom to see if she could go over. We both called Justin back and said call an ambulance because something was not right. I ran out of school and drove home. It was the longest drive of my life. By the time I got home Zachary had already left in the ambulance with a police escort. I got Justin and we drove to the hospital. I got out of the car and went inside. They brought me back to this waiting room. I was in a panic. I remember, as if in slow motion, a nurse walked up to me and said she was going to take me back to see Zach. She said she didn't know how he was. I walked into the room where he was and saw all sorts of doctors around him. One of them looked at me and shook his head. It took me a minute to process what he was saying. My son was gone.

I fell to the floor screaming. My mother, father, and Justin were all there. I ran through all my decisions. What did I do wrong? How could this happen? One of the nurses spoke with me. She said this just happens sometimes and we don't know why. She let me hold my son. I had all 32 pounds of him close to me for the last time. I held him close and played with his hair. I listened as the last bit of breath left his lungs. For a moment I thought they were wrong, that he was still alive. I was wrong.

The hospital staff eventually told me that I needed to say goodbye. Leave my baby in the hospital and go home. I didn't know how to walk. I asked them to promise me they'd stay with him. I wanted him wrapped up in blankets so he wouldn't get cold. One of Zach's aunts stayed with him until his father arrived. I don't know how he did it, but he drove from Virginia to Pennsylvania, knowing that Zach was gone.

It was all a huge blur.

At some point I was at my house, and Children and Youth Services were at my door. They came in and explained that it was routine for me to be under investigation anytime a child dies that is Zachary's age. I was told that I would have to sign away temporary custody of McKenzy. My parents became her custodial parents. The next day the police were at my house. They asked me to come down to the station for questioning. I didn't understand any of this. They asked me questions about the days leading up to his death. Next thing I knew, they were at my house and they were taking apart Zachary's room. His crib was broken down. Clothes were taken as well as my computer and a few other items. I didn't have time to grieve his loss, yet his room was already taken apart.

They called me back to the station again. This time it was different. The detectives sat me down and told me that Justin confessed. I felt like the wind was knocked out of me. Confessed?? I still thought Zach died because I didn't take him to the doctor when he was sick.

Justin confessed to punching my son in his stomach. He struck him so hard that he flew back and hit his head on my glass coffee table. Justin was on the phone with his children's mother. He was upset at her and the conversation. Zach was tapping Justin on the shoulder for some milk in his bottle. Justin said he told him no, but Zach kept asking. That's when he punched him. A split second decision that took his life and forever changed mine.

He was arrested. The story of my son was on the front cover of the paper and in the news. I still couldn't comprehend his death. Things were happening so fast and now I had to deal with so much more.

Justin chose himself. He didn't want to "get in trouble." He let my son suffer for **FIVE** days without so much as a word. He saw me make the phone calls to the doctors and he heard my concern about him not feeling better. If he had chosen my son, he may still be here.

The next year was a defining year. I learned so much about me, and the strength that I didn't know that I had. Everyone says, "I don't know how you can go on." I don't know either. Each day was a choice to live. Each day was a day that I could fight and try and help bring justice to Zachary. It was a long fight, but Gene Talerico, the Assistant District Attorney, made sure that Justin would spend as much time as possible behind bars. Justin was charged with third-degree

murder. He was sentenced to 15-40 years in jail. No amount of time makes it okay, but I wish the law would have allowed more.

The healing and grieving process began all over again. I had no idea the size of the mountain I would have to climb, the layers of grief, and the unforeseen hardships.

Zachary would have been 6 this year. He would have begun kindergarten. There are so many things that I won't get to know. What I do know is that Zachary's life, although short, has been an inspiration to many.

There is a lot to be learned.

I learned that I can't take life for granted and to cherish as many moments as possible with my children (McKenzy, nearly 8, and Liam, 2 ½).

I now live a life where I don't trust very many people. Nobody but family will watch my children. I am painstakingly aware of the evil some people are capable of. Each day I continue to heal through the love of my husband, children, family and friends.

I urge any parent who reads this to be extremely careful who you let near your children. Trust shouldn't just be given away, like I did. Life is fragile. Mistakes cannot be undone.

Thank you for listening to Zachary's story.