



Karen Schrah

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Living for Zachary

Loss is part of life. But there's also an order in which we expect to experience it. As children, we anticipate having to one day bury our parents but not the other way around. No parent can fathom having to bury a child — and certainly not one who is seemingly healthy. But for Karen Schrah, the unimaginable became a heartbreaking reality when, on April 2, 2009, her 16-year-old son, Zac, died unexpectedly during a routine football practice.

Prior to that fateful day, Karen spent her days like many others with teenagers at home. Weekdays were spent driving her son to football practice, and on the weekends, she cheered from the stands. To all who knew Zac, he was an energetic, healthy, accomplished athlete, and Karen was his biggest cheerleader and #1 fan.



Life Changed Without Warning

There were no signs. It all happened without warning. On what was an otherwise typical day, Karen's son Zac collapsed from Sudden Cardiac Arrest (SCA) on his high school football field. The Schrah family later learned Zac died from a congenital heart disease called Hypertrophic Cardiomyopathy (HCM), a common cause of SCA in young people, including young athletes.

HCM is a condition in which the heart muscle becomes thick, making it difficult for blood to leave the heart and forcing the heart to work harder to pump blood. It also can make it harder for the heart to relax and fill with blood.

Unfortunately, there was nothing to suggest Zac's heart had a problem, and they had no signs leading up to the experience that could have helped Karen or her son prevent what happened. Instead, their lives were forever changed.

But Karen funneled that grief into advocacy. As one friend noted, "Zac's dream was to save lives. [He] was inspired to be a doctor, and Karen wanted to see that dream through for him, just saving lives in a different way."

After researching the number of lives lost to SCA, Karen founded Living for Zachary, a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization, in June 2009 with a simple but important mission: raise awareness and prevent SCA in youth.



Turning Tragedy to Triumph

As a result of Karen's unyielding efforts, Living for Zachary has impacted thousands of families and children across Texas by providing youth heart screenings, Automated External Defibrillators (AED) donations, CPR/AED certification classes, scholarships, and awareness events.

To date, Living for Zachary has:

- Provided over 11,000 free heart screenings.
- Donated over 650 AEDs.
- Certified 3,500 individuals in CPR.

Youth heart screenings and AEDs are essential to preventing and responding to sudden cardiac arrest in children, and their need continues to grow. But they are expensive.

While finding funding for these life-saving items can be challenging, Karen and her team remain unwavering in their commitment. Together, they've cultivated the generous support of many faithful donors, and under Karen's leadership and advocacy, Living for Zachary now partners with Baylor Scott & White The Heart Hospital, enabling the organization to expand services and support across Texas.



Karen shares, "I started the nonprofit from one of life's most devastating moments and found a passion in educating others. I quickly learned how to operate a well-functioning organization and found people who shared my passions to help me get it off the ground."

United Hearts Saving Lives

While Karen works tirelessly in her free time to expand the impact of Living for Zachary, she's quick to acknowledge that she doesn't do it alone.

"A lot of the work that makes our awareness and heart screening events possible is done behind the scenes by a team of amazing volunteers and a phenomenal staff who are dedicated to the mission of Living for Zachary," says Karen.

Quite simply, she found her people. They share her dreams and desires for what Living for Zachary can do and become, and together, they help her further the organization's mission and impact.





It's hard work, but Karen persists — to redeem the heartache and save lives. And fortunately, when doubt creeps in or difficulty comes, Karen doesn't have to dig too deep to remember her "why."

"It is always surreal meeting the children whose lives have been saved from a Living for Zachary screening or an AED donation," said Karen. "When I have those moments, I find myself so thankful for what Living for Zachary has been able to accomplish out of heartbreak, providing other families the peace of mind to watch their children grow up."

Turning personal tragedy into a movement that now safeguards communities and families, many see Karen as a true impact hero, a beacon of hope, and a testament to the power of human compassion and determination.

"Karen's resilience, unwavering faith, and unrelenting drive to support others in their times of need have left an indelible impression on me. Her compassion and dedication to making a positive impact on the lives of others are both commendable and inspiring."

SCA: WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

- ★ #1 cause of death on school campuses.
- ★ #1 cause of death for student-athletes.
- ★ Immediate CPR and AED use saves lives.
- ★ 9 out of 10 SCA victims who receive a shock from an AED within 1 minute survive.

SCA in youth is frequently caused by an underlying heart condition that has gone undetected. Many youth with heart conditions appear healthy and pass regular checkups and sports physicals throughout childhood without any abnormalities detected.

While further medical tests can help provide early detection of heart abnormalities, insurance companies generally do not cover their costs without symptoms or a family history of heart problems. Typically, SCA symptoms are silent until it is too late and a child has collapsed, leaving only seconds for bystanders to respond with CPR and an AED before it's too late.

And that's why Living for Zachary remains focused on training and donating AEDs to youth-based organizations across Texas — to give hearts of all ages a second chance in the moments where every second counts.



Words of Wisdom

Life can be challenging. We all deal with loss, grief, and sadness in different ways. However, Karen and her family cling to a quote by John Wooden, a man many consider the greatest NCAA basketball head coach of all time: “Things turn out best for those who make the best of the way things turn out.”

These words hold a special place for the Schrahs because they were also meaningful to Zac. And Karen shares them to encourage those navigating tragedy. “It reminds us to take one day at a time,” says Karen. “Prayer, meditation, self-care, and surrounding yourself with a strong support system [all help carry you through]. Our family continues to carry on old traditions in Zac’s memory and create new traditions to honor him. We still celebrate his [earthly] birthday while remembering his life on his angel anniversary.”

Hope Can Be Found

In the face of unimaginable tragedy, Karen Schrah shows us the incredible strength of the human spirit, transforming her grief into a powerful force for good. She took a heart-wrenching loss and turned it into a movement that saves lives, reminding us that hope can be found even in the darkest times.

As we reflect on Karen's journey and the remarkable work of Living for Zachary, let us take a page from her book, finding strength in unity, support, and love.

Because gone is never forgotten.

About Karen:

Karen Schrah has spent over 30 years in the multifamily industry, 17 of those years with Harbor Group Management Company. She enjoys golf and fishing in her free time, but most of all, her greatest joy is time spent with her family. After Zac’s passing, they started taking annual family vacations, which she treasures.

To learn more about Living for Zachary, visit livingforzachary.org.



Written by Trisha Sheffield, Grace Hill Content Marketer

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