

Good morning,

My name is Allison Eggleston, known as “Aunt Allie” by my 4 nephews. Mason’s mother, Erica, is my older sister. Erica is 8 years older than I, so I was a young teenager when Mason was born. I now see this age gap as a blessing - the “cool Aunt”. I remember holding Mason for the first time on the couch in their living room while his older brother, Clay, just 2 years old bringing me toys from his room to show his brother. Brothers inseparable from the start. “Me and You against the world” they’d say. Everyone was so in love with the bundle of handsome joy in my young hands. Mason would be 14 in just a few short days. Instead of buying him a skateboard-themed present and having a family birthday party, I will be testifying on his behalf in attempt to give Mason the gift of a legacy. It is the least he deserves. Mason should still be here.

I am a firefighter/paramedic for The District of Columbia Fire Department, assigned to Engine 15 located in Anacostia, Southeast. On July 31st around 5:30pm, I had finally sat down to eat for the first time that rainy, dark day. I made my plate, sat it on the table, and as soon as I sat in that old rollie-chair; my mother calls me. I answered quickly, having a feeling that something was wrong because my parents were in Maine and usually cannot call due to poor service. I said “hey, mom”. In a voice I had never heard, not just from my mother, but in anyone’s tone, said “Mason is stuck in a storm drain. He’s... he’s dead. He drowned. They can’t get him out. I need you to go home”. Home being in Mount Airy where I live in a townhouse with my wife and 2 sons, just a 30 second walk away from the apartments in which they lived. A big reason those apartments were chosen to live in, because “Aunt Allie” lives right there. It was a tone spoken on the phone that contained no emotion. Not from lack of caring, but from a lack of comprehension. It is still not comprehensible, nor will it ever be. That tone of voice still replays in my head – it haunts me. All I could say was “okay, I’m leaving now”. I stared at the dinner table that sat my work family and said “My nephew drowned in the flash flood. He’s stuck in a storm drain. They can’t get him out. He’s dead. I... I have to go”. I grabbed my keys and ran to the alley where I was parked. I went to open the door, dropped my backpack on the ground, hung my head, and cried. Cries turned into

screams. I turned around to find the entire firehouse outside with me. My Battalion Fire Chief and his Aide show up. My Captain. My supervisors. The entire Firehouse and our Battalion Chief out of service to find a way to get me where I needed to be, and with the resources I needed. My lieutenant drove me to the Mount Airy PD precinct where I was to meet Erica and Clay. A fellow fireman followed with my car. I arrived at the precinct where I was met by an MAPD officer. I naturally went into first responder “work” mode. I asked him, “Tell me exactly what happened”. I was given the totality of the incident. Mason was outside with Clay when overflowing storm water swept him, butt first, into a 17” storm drain inlet. The quantity and weight of water was massive. Fire engines drafted 1,000s of gallons of water out before Mason could be reached, and even then – it took several more minutes to retrieve his body. “It turned from a rescue into a recovery very quickly” the officer said. I knew exactly what that meant. Almost 50 minutes from the initial 911 call, Mason’s adult sized, yet young teenage body was freed. Covered in a white sheet. ***It felt different to be on the other side of the placing of a white sheet on a dead body.*** This body was one I loved. I cherished. I took care of any time I was needed. I played toys with from the time he was born – those toys ranging from a baby rattle to a boogie board and swimming in the ocean with just a few weeks prior. The only 13-year-old boy I could sit and talk for hours with.

I got the story from the kind officer and was led to a back meeting room to where I found my sister and nephew still soaked, muddy, cut and bruised from trying to pull Mason out of the storm drain. I’ve heard the screams of Mothers who have lost their child too many times throughout my career. But once again, it’s different coming from my sister. “My baby!” she screamed, over and over. It is a wail from the depths of a broken heart that is inaccessible unless a tragedy like this unleashes it. “I felt his hand. I felt when he let go. I couldn’t get him out. I am so sorry, Mason. I tried so hard. I’m so sorry.” Clay screamed. They both still struggle immensely. Immensely, actually, is an understatement. It is heartbreaking to sit there and watch their struggle

without having an answer or a solution to provide. This all feels like a nightmare. It *is* a nightmare, but not one in which can be awoken from.

I drove them back to the apartments. They stayed in the car while I grabbed their necessities from their apartment, which was flooded up to the ankles. I drove them to my parents' house where the 3 of us stayed, just us, the first night until my parents and other family arrived home the following day. I medicated their screams until they fell asleep together.

I had the responsibility of cleaning out Mason's room the following day. His smell. His blanket. His video games. His beloved skateboards. His guitar. His clothes that should've been washed and put away but weren't due to being a 13-year-old boy. He was just a boy. That is the single-most difficult thing I have ever done in my life. I wish it on no one.

Before July 31st, I had never experienced true grief. I had never cleaned out a loved one's belongings. Never planned a funeral, especially that of a child. I had never written a eulogy, picked out a coffin and burial outfit. I had never spoken in front of hundreds at a vigil, press conference, or had even attended a town council meeting. I had never proposed a bill to be made in to law. I've done these things now; but it took life turning into "before Mason died" and "after Mason died" to get here.

I turned my grief into advocacy, research, outreach, and resolve. I've come to find that to be a coping mechanism, now. Once this bill is passed, I know I have the furthest depths of grief to process and work through. My body and mind are preparing for it as I type this.

The research was astonishingly heartbreaking. Dozens of lives have been lost due to ungrated/unguarded storm drain inlets since the 90's. Men, women, children (over half of the lives lost), and first responders. Since 2015, 35 cases have been reported. Twenty-one of those people died; nearly half of those lost were children. Thirteen of the deaths happened in the past three years alone. Make Mason #14. These numbers are likely also undercounted, since reports

of flood deaths often don't give details other than the fact that someone was swept away.

No law enforcing the proper safety standards to prevent loss of life regarding storm drain inlets exists in any United state, District, or Territory. Local fixes were applied in their respective local area following a tragedy in their town in some cases. NIOSH released 2 after-action reports for the firemen killed in 2 separate incidents that included recommendations such as grating, guarding, and marking these drains. But a "recommendation" is just that – a recommendation. Not a policy nor a law that must be adhered to. 2 weeks after Mason's death, a 5-year-old girl died in a storm drain inlet following a water main break. Make this innocent little girl's life #15 taken since 2015. Less than a week ago, during this current snowstorm, a young child was trapped in a storm drain culvert after falling through the snow, having no idea of its existence. This happened in Fairfax County, VA. It happened again, in our backyard. Thankfully, rescuers were able to retrieve the child who was unharmed. This is not a rare occurrence, but it is not widely known that this safety issue exists. We see storm drains each day and don't truly recognize their existence or dangers, because they are always there. Those affected by a tragedy in this manner now flashback to their loved one, or towns loved one, every time they see a storm drain inlet. I know I do. I try and aim my flashback to the happy memories I was blessed to make with Mason, but the brain can be cruel; it leads me directly back to that white sheet.

Heavy flood days have increased by 70% since the 1950's here on the east coast. Our infrastructure cannot support the masses of water in the quick downpours we now experience. The rushes of water are stronger than any man could overcome, let alone a child. A gallon of water weights greater than 8 pounds. Thousands of gallons surrounded Mason. Adding the velocity at which the water travels is insurmountable. The water always leads to a storm drain inlet of sorts. Storm drain culverts kill those swept away; but there is a solution. The solution is "Mason's Law". A simple grate or covering can prevent another family from having to grieve in ways no family should ever have to.

I am not angry. I am not angry with God, with the lack of protection within the law, with the poor upkeep in our storm drain systems as it pertains to increased flooding. I am saddened. I am saddened that it has taken personal tragedy to put safeguards in place for the next innocent soul's life to be spared. I am saddened it was not Mason's life that was spared had something been done sooner following another's loss. I am saddened to live in and watch this nightmare that is now my family's reality.

But – I have hope. There is a light. That light is “Mason's Law”. It is a light that will not bring Mason back, but Mason shines his own light on us each day. Mason's death will not be in vain. Mason's tragedy will save others, so long the law in his legacy is passed. It *must* be passed. Another death would be negligent and inexcusable. That cannot be on our beautiful State's conscious.

Thank you for your time and concern regarding this matter. I look forward to testifying in person at the upcoming hearing.

Warmly,

Allison Eggleston

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