

Chicago Tribune

# **A ceaseless pain for mother who lost daughter**

## **Faith Dremmer struck by motorist while riding bicycle**

### **downstate in March**

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At the end of another exhausting day, Michele Dremmer returns to a dark condominium, walks past her daughter's open bedroom door, and makes herself dinner.

In a few minutes, a neighbor will drop off Dremmer's two dogs, a welcome distraction from the memories hanging in frames on the wall and the sympathy cards in grocery bags at the dining room table.

But the diversions never last. The only break from the pain comes when she falls asleep clutching a silver frame with a picture of her daughter, Faith.

Nearly two months ago, police told Dremmer her only child was killed while biking in southern Illinois with two friends from the University of Chicago Laboratory School. An 86-year-old driver crossed the center line with his minivan and crashed into the girls, state police said.

Since the March 24 accident, Dremmer has replayed the conversation many times, but she still can't grasp the finality of the words.

Faith's death destroys everything the single mother who adopted her daughter from China as a toddler had hoped and planned for her child.

"She was my life. Half of me is dead. The other half of me is in excruciating pain. And I have to live like this," Dremmer said, sitting on a couch steps from her daughter's bedroom.

For years, Dremmer, in her late 50s, knew she wanted to adopt a girl from China. She had a vision of herself holding a smiling young child on her lap and teaching her all that she could.

When China opened its doors to American adoption in the early 1990s, Dremmer was divorced and working as an interior designer in Chicago. Friends and family cautioned her that adopting on her own would be hard.

"I was so proud of her because even though the odds were not in her favor, this was something that she really wanted to do," recalled Laura Gordon, a longtime friend.

A few months later, a woman who had just adopted a baby girl from China's Jiangxi province showed Dremmer a photo of a toddler at the same orphanage.

Dremmer saw the photo and made up her mind. In June 1994, she went to Jiangxi to pick up her daughter.

For weeks, while staying at Shanghai hotels, Dremmer dressed the 2-year-old in her own baggy sweatshirts. She potty-trained the toddler and read her "Goodnight Moon" at bedtime.

And after thinking about it for days, Dremmer gave the girl an American name — Faith — because she thought it would keep her safe.

"Faith just seemed to be right," Dremmer said. "It was a way of protecting her."

The mother and daughter eventually settled in a two-bedroom condo in Lincoln Park. Dremmer enrolled Faith at the Lab School, a private K-12 institution connected with the University of Chicago.

They grinned widely and hugged tightly in hundreds of photos taken through the years: Michele and Faith dressed in leotards dancing hip-hop; Michele and Faith rollerblading in a park; Michele and Faith flashing peace signs for the annual holiday card.

Dremmer, who was also adopted, never wanted her daughter to feel the confusion she experienced as a child. So she told Faith the story of her adoption every chance she could. At the end, with tears in her eyes, she'd say, "You know I love you, Faith."

And Faith would respond: "Yes, Mom. I know. I love you, too."

One of Faith's earliest friends was a tiny, blue-eyed tomboy named Julia in her third grade class.

When Dremmer took a job at the same company where Julia's father, James Baird, worked, the two families seemed connected for life. They celebrated holidays, attended school programs and drove their daughters to summer camp together. Dremmer joined the same temple as the Bairds because she wanted Faith to be exposed to its values. She took out a home equity loan to pay for Faith's bat mitzvah party.

Over the years, Faith and Julia had too many sleepovers to count; Faith in Julia's trundle bed, or the girls side-by-side in Faith's double.

The girls' social circle expanded as they got older. There was Kaia Tammen, another adopted girl, who transferred to the Lab School in seventh grade. And Audrey Alexander, who planned a surprise party for Faith's 17th birthday.

As the girls became close, they also got to know Faith's relationship with her mom.

"This was a relationship to be jealous of," said Alexander. "Whenever we went over to (Faith's) house, we'd watch a movie with Michele on the couch. It's not one of those things where she was trying to be a teenager. She was just part of sleeping over at Faith's."

Faith was giddy when she told her mom in October that she, Julia Baird and Tammen were planning a bike trip for spring break. Dremmer didn't hesitate, knowing James Baird would chaperone. The girls would cherish the memory, and it wouldn't cost too much.

Mother and daughter communicated by e-mail, text or phone several times over the first three days. On the fourth day, Dremmer planned to call her daughter at 2 p.m.

As the time drew closer, she decided to wait. The girls might still be on the road and Dremmer didn't want to distract them.

Minutes later, Dremmer's phone rang. James Baird was on the line. There had been an accident; a police officer came on and told her the news.

Julia Baird and Tammen missed the tributes at Faith's funeral. Tammen's two broken arms required multiple surgeries; Baird's fractured collarbone, rib and related nerve damage called for months of rehabilitation. They're only beginning to process the death of their friend.

"We all had so much that we'd been looking forward to. Even just like prom. Faith and Julia and I were talking about buying our prom dresses," Tammen said, a red scar from the accident still healing down the center of her face.

"I still just kind of naturally just think of her, as like, she'll come back. She's going to be here."

Doctors told Baird's parents her head trauma blocked memories of the crash but that she'd ask questions as she recovered. For weeks, Julia Baird spoke of Faith in the present tense, unaware that she had died. At the end of April, the questions came. James Baird told his daughter the truth.

"There was a long pause, and she started to cry," Baird said.

Dremmer has talked to the girls as much as she can to help them grieve. Faith's boyfriend, Aalap Herur-Raman, 17, also calls Dremmer when he needs to be consoled. She wants Faith's friends to keep in touch, especially near graduation and before they leave for college.

The 86-year-old driver will appear in court June 10 for an improper lane usage citation. If found guilty, he'll be fined \$75, police said.

Dremmer doesn't think about the driver often, although she imagines that he'll be devastated by the accident for the rest of his life — a feeling she understands.

At night, Dremmer comes home to a struggle all her own.

Memories are everywhere: in photo albums on the shelves, in college application essays on the computer, in the way the dogs search Faith's bedroom.

Dremmer looks up when the phone rings; it sounds like a strumming guitar. That's the ring tone Faith picked. She can't bring herself to change it now.