



**“Don’t cry because it’s over, smile because it happened.”**

That was the philosophy of Hinckley native Connor Lynskey

– a young man who truly understood the things that mattered most in life. Outside of God, family, friends and helping others, he didn’t put much stock in anything else. His dreams and aspirations were fueled by a strong desire to better the community that surrounded him, and he was well-equipped for the journey. When reflecting on Connor’s presence, family members use words like “humble,” “confident,” “kind,” “considerate,” “leader” and “such a good kid.”

Connor’s soccer coach may have perfectly encompassed what the young man stood for when he created the *Connor Lynskey Award*, which is now given to one player on Holland Patent’s varsity soccer team each year. The criteria for the award’s recipient is, “someone who always gives 100 percent at everything he does; doesn’t take shortcuts; always leads by example; is kind; a leader off and on the field; a good musician; does great in school; is an excellent runner; and always treats people with respect.” Some may view that standard as impossible to achieve, but those who knew Connor say that he was able to accomplish this feat every day. He was the kind of kid you didn’t have to ask to do the right thing; he simply did it on his own.

On August 11, 2018, Connor was struck and killed by a drunk driver as he was leaving a concert at Darien Lake.

His life spanned just nineteen short years, but for individuals like Connor, that’s all the time they need to make a lasting impact on those around them. He proved that if you strive to be the best of which you’re capable, it doesn’t take long to create a life worth remembering. Those who knew Connor Lynskey the best will never forget him - they can’t. When speaking to people closest to him, there are tears, smiles, laughter and an overwhelming sense of pride in the person he was. They feel as though he had so much more to offer the world and many more lives to change for the better. In the midst of their pain and grief, Connor’s family and friends fight every day to ensure his impact continues to grow through “Connor’s Way.”



## Connor



**Above: The Lynskey Family. From L to R - Donna, Meghan, Michael Sr., Connor and Michael, Jr.**

Two years ago, following his passing, members of the Lynskey family decided to honor Connor's life by organizing a community run/walk in his name. The first annual Connor's Way 5-mile Scenic Memorial Run/Walk took place in Hinckley in 2018, and that was the start of their mission to raise scholarship money for youth in the area. Inspired by the late young man's life, volunteers for Connor's Way decided to do what they felt he would have done – turn a tragic event into an opportunity to better the lives of others.



Connor Lynskey was born on September 20, 1999 to Mike and Donna Lynskey, he attended Holland Patent schools and lived in Hinckley, NY throughout his upbringing. Very well liked and highly respected by his peers, Connor was voted class president four years in a row. They also voted him “most likely to succeed following high school graduation”. In addition to being a straight-A student, Connor was a talented athlete who was named captain of Holland Patent's soccer team. He was selected as a Center State Conference All-Star and was the 2017 Division I Player of the Year for the Center State Conference. Connor was also a member of the school's track and field team.

Most students would be thrilled to have attained any bit of the success mentioned above, but those are only a portion of Connor's accomplishments. He was a saxophonist in the school jazz band and wind ensemble. In 2017, Connor was accepted into SUNY Upstate Medical School through the Early Acceptance Rural Medicine Program, and attended Siena College for his undergraduate studies. Connor finished his freshman year as an honors student and planned on continuing his path to become a physician the following semester. He received a great deal of inspiration from his older brother Michael Jr., who was already doing quite well in medical school. The two often discussed opening a practice together in their hometown.

Growing up in Hinckley, Connor and Michael shared the same dream of becoming rural doctors. They recognized the lack of medical care for citizens in areas such as theirs and wished to fill that void. Both of them, as well as their sister Meghan, were raised to abide by a team mentality and rather than succeeding alone, they learned it was better to succeed as a community. When speaking with Michael Jr., who just graduated from medical school, he used the phrase, “Iron sharpens iron” to describe their attitude toward working with others. This means, making others better will make you better. He has fond memories of Connor's kindhearted nature.

“He had a dry, witty sense of humor. He could make anyone laugh,” Michael Jr. told me. “He was always optimistic. He could see the good in anyone.”

One thing Connor was passionate about was living life to the fullest. He loved outdoor activities, pick-up sports with his friends and discovering new things – even if he had to do it alone. Connor even travelled to Lima and Machu Picchu, Peru, where he spent three weeks with his college friend, Manu in his home country. He enjoyed altar serving at his family's parish because, as he said, that's when he felt “closest to God.” Nothing took priority over his family – he was an attentive and loyal younger brother, a dedicated and protective older brother, a caring son and a grandson that any grandparent would love to have. He would check on his grandmother and grandfather regular-ly, and wrote them letters from college every chance he had.

The shocking news of Connor's life being taken was devastating to his family. It was particularly saddening, Michael Jr. said, be-cause Connor was at a pivotal point in his life.

“He was really coming into his own in terms of figuring out who he was. You could see a newfound sense of purpose in him and a sense of enthusiasm about life.” He said., “It was inspiring.”

Since August 11, 2018, the lives of Connor's family and friends have never been the same. When something so horrible happens to someone so good, it can cause the best of the world to question their faith. However, the Lynskeys have handled their loss with incredible grace and dignity. When speaking to Don Lynskey, Connor's uncle, he shared that it doesn't get any easier as time passes. The level of pain they feel each day makes their response to the tragedy even more remarkable. They were able to broaden Connor's impact on the community by providing a foundation that honored his plans.

They turned the event of his passing into a wonderful cause that has benefited many.

### **Connor's Way**

Just weeks after Connor's passing, a friend of Don's suggested the Lynskey family organize a memorial run/walk event in Connor's honor. Several volunteers and people who were experienced event co-ordinators helped the family set up the race in a very short period of time.

"It was amazing. It was really through the help of many volunteers, family and close friends that we were able to get the memorial event organized," Don told me. "There were some people who weren't even friends prior, but lived in the community. I can tell you the biggest problem we've had in both years of Connor's Way is we've had too many volunteers; which is a great problem to have and reflective of the community that we live in."

If they were going to do a run/walk in Connor's memory, they had to do it in a special place. After some deliberation, they decided to have Connor's Way on the same trail that Connor ran regularly. It began at the Lynskey home and went five miles through the beautiful and peaceful woods of Hinckley.

The race is a fundraiser that supports the Connor Arthur Lynskey Memorial Scholarship Fund which awards scholarships annually to students who are graduating from Holland Patent High School; as well as annual scholarships to high school graduates throughout Oneida and Herkimer counties. There is also a scholarship program set up for pre-med students who are accepted into the Upstate Medical School through the Early Acceptance Rural Medicine Program, the same program in which Connor and Michael, Jr. were enrolled. Those students receive an initial scholarship during pre-med studies and a secondary scholarship after matriculating into the program. They must also have an interest in becoming a rural-practice physician, as that was Connor's dream.

At the first Connor's Way race in 2018, the response was incredible. After just two months of planning, the event took place on October 13, 2018. It was a rainy fall day, but that didn't stop hundreds of supporters and participants from showing up and giving it their all. To think that Connor was lost just two months prior, it was a surreal experience for the family to see all of the great people in our community show up.

"I was overwhelmed with joy, but at the same time a lot of grief," Michael Jr. said. "With everyone that showed up, it just demonstrated how large of a role (Connor) had in the community that he didn't even know."

"It filled my heart. It's reassuring, but it certainly reinforces that you have to live life to the fullest, because you just don't know," Don said. "You can feel (Connor's) presence there."

Because of COVID-19, this year's event will be held virtually from September 15-22. Participants can do their run or walk anywhere in the world, record their time and submit it through the web site. Although you will not be able to experience the incredible atmosphere of Connor's Way with the rest of the runners and walkers this year, it's still an amazing community cause that not only helps kids, but keeps Connor's memory alive. As a participant in last year's event, I can say with no doubt in my mind that Connor's Way is something you will want to be a part of every year and not do it just once.

### **My Experience at Connor's Way**

Never in my life would I have attached the label of "runner" to any description of myself. With that said, I was a bit nervous about the physical demand that accompanied a 5-mile run, but still I decided to sign up for Connor's Way 2019. One summer day, I was driving down Culver Ave. in Utica when I spotted a sign for the event on the grass at Proctor Park. I recalled reading about Connor and his family and immediately wanted to be a part of the cause. I'd been acquainted with some of his family members in the past and they were wonderful people, so I assumed the same of Connor. I never ran more than two miles in my entire life, so I began training immediately and thought constantly about the race in the coming weeks.



*From L to R - Meghan, Michael, Jr. & Connor*





Part of me felt uneasy – not simply because of the run itself, but I was also preparing myself for a scene of sadness and grief. Who could blame the Lynskeys and their family and friends for feeling a level of despair at an event such as this? I wondered how his parents, his brother Michael and sister Meghan would feel being around so many people while constantly being reminded of their great loss. When the runners and walkers arrived in Hinkley, we filtered into a shuttle bus that brought us to the trail in which the event took place. As we filed out of the bus and made our way toward the starting area, I looked up to see the name of the road was “Connor’s Way” - a kind gesture on the part of the Town of Russia.



At this point, much of my anxiety was gone. The scene of sad faces I’d created in my mind turned out to be a sea of people filled with great joy and excitement. We often hear the term “celebration of life” in lieu of a memorial; however, this was the greatest celebration of a lost loved one that I’d ever seen in my life. There was nothing but love in the air that day – people who I’d never met before were having full conversations with me, which was very nice because I’d travelled alone to the race. There was music playing, people laughing, and it was a perfect September morning for a journey through the wooded trail.

After being there about a half hour, I spotted Connor's dad,





Mike. I walked up to him and put my hand out. He reached out, shook my hand and pulled me in for a big hug. Over the several hours of the event, the smile never once left his face. It became clear to me that we were honoring a great kid on this day and while it may have been a bittersweet moment for all those in attendance, we were all helping accomplish Connor's goal – helping others. After the opening ceremony, which included a great bagpipe performance, we were off on the trail together. Down Connor's Way we went, and into the woods of Hinkley.

The run was tough. REAL tough. At the beginning of the trail there's a huge hill that, at the time, looked like Mount Everest. But we all survived it and kept trekking on, up and down hills, past mile markers and grabbing cups of water from volunteers at various check-points. Along the way, I couldn't help but think about the fact that Connor ran on this same trail all the time. While it was sad to realize he would no longer have that opportunity, it was inspiring to know he was there in spirit. As we came to the fourth mile, we approached the back end of the huge hill I referenced above, and it was difficult to get through. Every time I wanted to quit, I thought about what the Lynskey family had been through and how they never gave up in the face of their tragedy. I also thought about my dad, who had just gone through open heart surgery about a month prior. Events such as that and what we learn from situations like Connor's really puts life in perspective.

When the race was over, everyone gathered back at the starting point, where there was live music by the Crazy Fools, Connor's cousins' band. There were food vendors, free candy and fruit snacks to replace the carbs we burned and then the awards ceremony. Overall, it was an incredible day that I'll never forget. "Connor's Way" was an event I was proud to be a part of. I still wear my blue Connor's Way shirt regularly. I was truly looking forward to the 2020 race and although COVID-19 has prevented it from happening on the Hinkley trail, I and hopefully many of you, will be participating in the virtual race this year.

#### **Remember What Connor Said**

Although it's easier said than done, the only way to honor those we've lost is to follow Connor's advice – "Don't cry because it's over, smile because it happened." Because a life is taken too soon, it doesn't mean it was wasted. In fact, Connor for example, lived a fuller life in 19 years than many people do in 80. When you leave this earth, all monetary and material possessions are left behind, and for the most

part, they no longer carry value. The truth is, when we leave this earth, we just want to be remembered; we want to know we made a difference. We can say without hesitation, that Connor Lynskey did just that – he made an impact on those around him. It's been a tremendous struggle for the family, especially in light of the way Connor was lost, but Don and Michael, Jr. haven't allowed their anger to get the best of them. That's not what Connor would've wanted.

"Anger will eat you alive if you let it, so you have to let it go. Just rely on the good memories and the love you had for your departed," Don said.

"It's important to forgive and not hold on to those negative emotions," Michael, Jr. said. "It's important to come to terms with what has happened and try to remember the good things and hold on to those."

He, like all human beings, was not perfect, but we could all live a little better life if we did it Connor's way.

**To find out more about Connor's Way, visit [ConnorsWay.com](http://ConnorsWay.com). On the website you can fill out your registration for this year's Connor's Way 5-mile Memorial Run/Walk virtual event held Sept. 15-22.**

