

# A YOUNG LIFE LOST TO LIQUOR AT LSU

## Corey Domingue couldn't shake the family curse

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Just two weeks ago, in the pickup truck on the way to the Wal-Mart to buy their mother a birthday present, Corey Domingue had decided he needed to say something to his sister about her drinking problem.

The family had a history of alcoholism. The Domingue kids knew that. Certainly, Corey did. He was the gifted one, the first in the family to go to college, the oldest child who wanted to break out and avoid the struggles his parents had endured.

He must have been listening when Kirk and Tammy Domingue sat the children down and told them that hard drinking seemed almost genetic in their family. Kirk Domingue, a 48-year-old disabled welder, had learned the hard way, and he wasn't shy about telling the kids about his problem: how one drink was too much for him, and a thousand never enough.

He told the kids about his own father's problem with liquor and how one day they might start drinking and never be able to stop. It worried him and his wife.

But Corey, he was different. Always had been. He was tall and strong, a football player and an honor roll student. He had a plan: Go to Louisiana State University, excel like he always had, and use his chemical engineering degree to get a good job. Then maybe build a house and find a wife and raise a family. He wanted perfection, even demanded it.

And so, Corey, 19, had a talk with his 17-year-old sister that evening in the pickup. He couldn't have Cherie drinking so much that she hit their father like she had done, and then run away, refusing to come back. He didn't want a sister of his drinking until she lost control.

"Kick that, Cherie," he told her, as they made their way to Wal-Mart from their home in Franklin. "You're too pretty for that."

Cherie remembers listening as he drove the truck. She idolized her brother. She wanted to be like him in every way. "Be perfect just like him," she thought. So she agreed to stop drinking. But she kept a secret tucked deep inside -- one she wouldn't tell her parents until after they placed Corey inside the concrete tomb in the green field near the sugar mill.

Corey drank, too. She just didn't know how much.

Friends forever

Joe Breaux came home last Thursday evening to find his buddy getting ready for the night. People were coming over, a handful of students, and Breaux had known Domingue long enough to know he would want to look good.

They had gone to school together for years. First, at Berwick Junior High, then at Berwick High. They shared more than just a two-story, off-campus apartment in Baton Rouge. They shared a history. They had played on the high school football team together. They had taken some of the same classes and followed the same path. To graduation day. To LSU. And now they were sophomores together.

Domingue's parents had never been to college. His father hadn't even made it through high school. But they were always huge LSU fans, and their son was raised on Tiger purple and gold, and the idea that he could do better.

He had the smarts. Hadn't the second-grade teacher told his mother that? That he could go across St. Mary Parish to the gifted program in Berwick, if he wanted a challenge?

His parents didn't want to make him go. But from a young age their son had wanted to be the best. And so they weren't surprised when he accepted the challenge. He'd go to the bus stop and get onto the bus, sometimes sleeping through the 45-minute ride, sometimes laughing with a new friend, Grant Hoppe.

Years later, Hoppe would be his first roommate at LSU. They lived in a dormitory together freshman year: the two gifted kids from Berwick High School. But Hoppe, also 19, dropped out after one semester. Just packed up and left one day, depressed and lonely and ready to make money instead of taking classes.

It upset the Domingues. But then Breaux took Hoppe's place, and when the two students took an off-campus apartment this year, Kirk Domingue couldn't have been happier. The two kids were level-headed, he thought, even brilliant. He wouldn't have let his son move off campus if it hadn't been for Breaux, and he doesn't blame his son's friend for what happened last Thursday night.

The idea, said LSU student Kerry Michel, was to have a few drinks and just hang out at the apartment. They left and bought liquor at a Winn-Dixie. They used Domingue's fake identification to get it. Vodka, bourbon, a bottle of rum. Castillo Gold, Breaux remembered, "some real cheap rum."

Just one or two

Cherie Domingue remembers the first time Corey owned up to it: that he didn't do what his father had urged him to, that he sometimes took a drink.

It was July 16, her 17th birthday, and she and her brother had gone bowling and then to the movies. Now they were headed to a friend's house. Some people might be drinking, Corey knew, and he didn't want his kid sister blabbing to their parents. He added, Cherie recalled, that she could talk to him about drinking, if she ever got into that, and Cherie rolled the thought over in her mind.

She wasn't drinking, not then, and she was surprised that her brother was. He was particular about what he put into his body, consumed with health and strength and getting stronger. At times, he made himself drink a gallon of water a day and eat nothing but protein bars, protein shakes, egg whites and tuna.

"I thought it was nasty," Cherie Domingue said, and she told him so. But, yes, she would keep his secret. That's what they did: He protected her and she protected him. And anyway, Corey was Cherie's idol.

It wasn't just that he was smart. He was giving and caring. He was a great athlete, too, and there was something special about his skills. Scott Tregle, the former head football coach of the Berwick Panthers, noticed it right away: Domingue worked harder than most kids.

At first, he had to. He wasn't 6-foot-2, like he would grow to be, and his body hadn't yet developed. He was chunky and a little slow, Tregle thought. He needed better footwork if he wanted to play offensive line, and he needed to work out more.

Domingue did. He wasn't afraid of hard work. As the only student from the gifted program on the football team, he knew all about work in the classroom, and he brought the same determination to practice. He knew what he had to do: Get stronger. Block better. Be faster. And the coaches noticed.

Howard Hartley, the team's offensive coordinator at the time, decided to start him in the middle of the line. Hartley needed an intelligent center, someone who could call blocking schemes one moment and then knock a nose tackle on his rear. "The play starts with him," Hartley said, and Domingue became a star, all-district, all-parish.

In December 2001, months before his high school graduation, Domingue played in the tri-parish all-star game and received a certificate that his mother would keep. It irked her that they had spelled his name wrong. But he didn't care. He told his mother that people knew who he was, no matter how they spelled his name, and his father was proud.

Kirk Domingue had told Corey from the start: "If you don't want to struggle like we do, you're going to have to make it on your own."

Now, he was doing just that, and the problems of the past seemed to be slipping away, like water down the bayou. His father was clean and sober, after bottoming out in 1994, hooked on painkillers and beer, he said. The family -- Kirk and Tammy's four children, and another child from Kirk's first marriage -- was coming together. They bought a large, two-room tent and camped on the weekends, fishing and hunting as the sun went down over the water.

"It was a new world," Kirk Domingue said. "I could hear the birds singing. I could enjoy the sunshine, enjoy the rain."

And his son was going to be a chemical engineer.

### Rum and Coke

Sometime after midnight, Breaux and Michel helped Domingue to the bathroom inside the apartment. The rum was all but gone. Domingue liked rum and Cokes. That was his drink, and Breaux had watched him drink them that Thursday night during study breaks. For the most part, Breaux said, he was upstairs reading. The 19-year-old computer science major had a physics test coming up.

But when Domingue seemed like he was going to get sick, Breaux came out and helped him to the bathroom. There, he passed out on the toilet, then the floor. His friends decided they would check on him through the night and let Domingue, as Breaux said, "sleep it off."

It had happened before, Hoppe, his former roommate, would learn -- the passing out, the drinking too much. To some students, it was no big deal. This was college. But it surprised Hoppe. After all, Domingue didn't drink in high school and the only time Hoppe saw Domingue drinking in college had ended uneventfully. That night last fall, he recalled, Domingue drank vodka and tequila at a club in Lafayette with a few other friends.

He thought it was Domingue's first time, and soon, Hoppe said, he was drinking more. After he dropped out of school, Hoppe heard his friend was drinking to get drunk -- and that took time. "If he wanted to get drunk, he had to drink a lot," Breaux had noticed, "because he had a really high tolerance."

Hoppe had tried to talk to his friend. "Man, you've got to lay off that stuff. You really do," he said. But Domingue apparently didn't listen and his parents didn't know. He appeared to be doing well in school, tutoring other students in calculus, traveling to Franklin on weekends to coach his little brother's pee-wee football team, calling home most every day.

Last Thursday was no exception. Domingue studied, then he cooked a roast and a pot of white beans -- something he loved to do -- and called his folks. Everyone talked to him: his mom, his little brother, his two sisters and his dad. He was excited about the Florida game on the LSU schedule for Saturday, pumped up and predicting a national championship for his beloved purple and gold.

That was why he had come home the weekend before, why he wouldn't be there for his mother's birthday two days later, and why he had been in the pickup truck with Cherie that night, driving to the Wal-Mart and telling his sister to straighten up. He didn't want to miss game day.

And this was why they couldn't believe it when they got word: that Breaux and Michel had found him gurgling at 4:30 a.m., that they had called 911 afraid he couldn't breathe, and then called back, frantic, because he was dying right there on the bathroom floor.

They started CPR. Paramedics arrived and took him to Our Lady of the Lake Hospital. Medical workers tried to revive him. They failed. His blood-alcohol content was found to be .43, enough to reduce brain function to the point where he wasn't breathing.

Police carried the news in person to the tiny home on Main Street in Franklin. They walked to the door. Cherie saw them. She thought they were coming for her, and she hid in her bed, listening as her father went out to meet the people on the porch. At the door, she heard him scream, "No."

What could be said?

Doug Hebert was the deacon at the church across the street and the Domingues were family. Hebert had married Kirk's mother's niece. It was a distant connection, but real, and now the 61-year-old, bespectacled man had to figure out how to say good-bye to the student who, the television kept saying, "drank himself to death."

Cherie didn't like the way that sounded, like all Corey ever did happened in that bathroom, in that apartment, on that one night. She wanted to find another way to say it, but she couldn't. Like the deacon, she had thoughts weighing heavy on her mind.

She had Corey's secret.

"Maybe if I had said something," she thought. But what could she have said? Only once had she seen her brother drink, and that was just a couple sips of cheap wine, she remembered. How

could she know he would die for the bottle? Wasn't he the one who had warned her to stop drinking?

It was confusing. There were people coming and going, and flowers piling up in the kitchen next to buckets of fried chicken and bags of corn chips: "From the Desotos . . .," the cards said. "From the gang in the meat department of Franklin Supermarket . . ."

Corey's mother counted 600 names in the book at the funeral home. Old coaches and young students, family and friends -- they all came. At one point, the entire offensive line from Domingue's playing days seemed to walk in the door at once. They came for their center, the middle of that Panther line.

Deacon Hebert sat the Domingues down in an office. He wanted to know what they wanted, if they wanted him to avoid the whole drinking thing, or if they wanted him to teach, to use Corey as an example, to help others by talking about what happened.

"If it can help one kid . . .," they said.

And so the deacon told the story of the boy, and his mistake, in hopes that someone would hear. Some liked what he had to say, others didn't. Cherie liked to think about her memories of Corey, and so she kept her silence. The memories were easier to take than the deacon's story.

For days, she told no one what she knew. Not when grief overcame her and she collapsed on the kitchen floor. Not when she shook with tears before the concrete tomb in the green field near the sugar mill. It was only later, only after the deacon had left them and the crowd had gone home, that Cherie decided to tell her father, confess her secret fear that she had somehow killed her brother.

"Baby," he told her, "Corey made his choice. Not you."

It's how they feel now that they know everything, now that their son is dead, and purple and gold flowers are blowing in a cool breeze at a cemetery called Perpetual Park. It's just down Main Street, around the bend, to the right, near the pizza place and the Chinese restaurant.

The Domingues will be able to walk here, if they wish, and Cherie will be able to stop by and think about her brother and how she found the courage to touch him one last time before they closed his casket. There was something she needed to do. She had to fix his hair.

She wanted it to be perfect.