In March 2012, Deborah Dunklin Tipton of Memphis, TN, lost her only son, Robert Eugene Tipton, Jr. He was Deborah’s “miracle child,” born after years of infertility and intervention. Twenty months later, the family grew with the birth of his sister, Mary. Growing up, Robert and Mary enjoyed traveling, sports, and spending time with their extended family and friends.

“He was especially kind to and protective of his little sister Mary, whom he adored. All our pictures show him smiling and happy. Robert was quite trusting, expecting the best from others and assuming that most people were honorable and loving in the ways his family, especially his grandparents, had always been to him,” Deborah says.

When Robert attended college at High Point University in High Point, NC, Deborah believes he was searching for a group of friends to provide the warmth he felt at home. His search led him to pledge a fraternity, even though he wasn’t a partier. In the weeks leading up to his death, Robert was severely hazed in the fraternity pledging process — he confided to his sister that he was worried the brothers were going to punish him for revealing a fraternity secret, but asked her not to tell their mom. On March 26, 2012, Robert was pronounced dead with blunt force injuries on his head, neck, and knees, including hemorrhages on his left eye after being found unresponsive in the apartment of one of the fraternity members.

“I live daily with the guilt of not having understood enough about the situation to save my son. Not a day goes by that I don’t wake up thinking about Robert. Mary, too, is working through her loss and devastation, but she, like I, will never be the same. Every day, I keep thinking he will walk in the door. I would like to help other parents by educating college students about the dangers they might face and how to escape from peer pressure and seek the help they need.”

Deborah was connected with the Gordie Center last year through her cousin, who was studying at the University of Virginia’s Darden School of Business. When he heard Gordie’s story, it reminded him of Robert’s, and he talked with Deborah about the Gordie Center’s efforts. She went to Gordie.org, and was inspired to give a donation. Deborah’s passion for the Gordie Center’s mission is evident:

Deborah Dunklin Tipton shares how losing her only son to hazing led her to the Gordie Center.
HAZING PREVENTION NATIONWIDE

Our mission at the Gordie Center includes hazing prevention and education, and this past year was especially heartbreaking as we learned of the hazing death of Tim Piazza at Penn State. His story felt so familiar to us — a bright, young college student looking for friendship through a fraternity, overdosing on alcohol during a hazing event...just like Gordie did 13 years ago. We were heartbroken and so sad to see history repeat itself — which it unfortunately does across the country, on a regular basis, in the form of alcohol overdose and hazing-related deaths. Not all of these deaths receive the attention that Tim's did, but all of them represent the completely preventable loss of someone's child, someone's sibling, someone's friend. Enough has long been enough, and it's frustrating that each new tragedy highlights the rampant lack of education about alcohol overdose symptoms, how to help a friend in trouble, and the horrors of hazing. Our message at the Gordie Center is so simple: Save a Life. Make the Call. When you see someone in distress, do not hesitate to call for help. Gordie, Tim, Robert Tipton, and so many others would be alive today had someone called for help.

Gordie Center staff collaborated with colleagues at the University of Virginia to develop a hazing prevention program for our students that focuses on the positive aspects of group membership and the hidden harms of hazing. We plan to adapt the "Positive Organization Expectations" program for our national audience in the coming year. To complement that program, we are creating materials for our GORDIEstore to give high schools and institutions of higher education nationwide a comprehensive hazing prevention campaign that is easy to implement. Donations to the Gordie Center help us move to the forefront of hazing prevention efforts nationally. Education and awareness around alcohol overdose and hazing can save lives. Together, let's work even harder to prevent alcohol overdose and hazing tragedies.

"I read Gordie’s story and realized that another mother was suffering, as I was, the loss of her son during a fraternity initiation. I, like Gordie’s mother, felt that a mother’s job is to protect her child. I shared her feelings of pain and grief over having failed to protect Robert and the frustration of not being able to get justice for him. I so admire the Lanahans for being able to turn the tragic death of their son into something good by founding this Center that works to change the culture of campus drinking and drug use."

With her donations to the Gordie Center, Deborah wants to help educate students, administrators, and alumni about how irresponsible behavior can and too often does lead to tragic consequences. She aims to assist programs that give meaningful help to students, and is especially happy about the Gordie Center’s emphasis on bystander intervention.

"Gordie and Robert lost their lives for no reason. Students need to realize this can and does happen. They need to know how to get out of a dangerous or potentially fatal situation. We need to create healthier college campuses, dedicated to protecting students and educating young people to live compassionate and caring lives."

Deborah encourages others to support the Gordie Center because of the Center’s commitment to create and disseminate evidence-informed programs and materials to decrease the negative consequences of hazardous drinking and illegal drug use among college students.

"I am so impressed with the Gordie Center’s mission: Save a Life. Make the Call. The Center’s film HAZE highlights the dangers of hazing, and should be viewed by as many people as possible. The film demonstrates how crucial it is to call for help and prevent tragedy from happening."

Coming from a close-knit family, Robert and his sister had planned to run the family farms together after college. The siblings wanted to raise their children in close proximity to each other to give them the warm family environment they so enjoyed growing up. Deborah describes Robert as thoughtful and affectionate, and always imagined him being a great father. Those future dreams died with Robert.

"Being Robert and Mary’s mother is the most wonderful thing to ever happen to me. Robert wanted to make everyone around him happy. His friends all remembered his generous nature, his easy sense of humor, his kindness. He said to me so often, “I love you, Mom.” Those were the last words he sent me in a text. He made our home and our lives shine."

We need to create healthier college campuses, dedicated to protecting students and educating young people to live compassionate and caring lives.”