

Bedford is family

By Cindy Ramirez

Bedford High School's students are trying to heal from losing a second student since school started in September. How do you explain to a young person why their friend won't be coming back to school, playing their position on the football field, or joining them for prom and graduation? This is the question Bedford's parents, teachers, and coaches have been trying to answer after losing senior Colton Durbin in a car accident last week. Five weeks before this tragedy, Bedford lost freshman Kelsey Koepfler when she died after being struck by a car. No one has any answers so we have to turn to each other for support during this difficult time. Bedford has been surrounded by loving thoughts and prayers, not only from our community, but communities far and wide that have reached out to show how much they care about our school and students.

Bedford High School students and staff have leaned on one another trying to grieve and dry the tears. Most of these kids have never had to face death, let alone the death of one of their friends. Colton was a friend to everyone he met. His infectious smile and quick wit made the people around him feel like they had known him forever, even if they had just met him. The friends lucky enough to have known him for years felt like Colton was family. Colton's family was very aware of how special this young man was and how lucky they were to have him in their lives.

The word of Colton's death spread fast through the school that fateful day thanks to social media. School lessons were halted and replaced with life lessons filled with hugs and tears. All activities for the evening were cancelled and a vigil was planned in the football stadium. Colton considered home. Hundreds of Bedford students, staff, parents, and anyone else that was touched by the passing of this young man, that left us too soon, gathered to remember Colton. Candles were lit and lanterns were set free into the night sky to honor Colton's memory. The silence of the mourners was indescribable. You could have heard a pin drop in that stadium. His parents were on the field surrounded by the football team that Colton called "family." The back of the football jerseys, in place of their name, was the word "Family." Jeff Wood, Bedford Varsity Football coach, explains, "Family was started with an idea that all football teams should be family because of all of the adversity we face during a season. Ron Estes, the previous Blissfield football coach, gave me the idea in 2004. When I brought the idea to Bedford in 2008, we surrounded it with the concept that we are only one member of a family and we each have a role. Also, we wear 'TEAM me' shirts on Thursdays to prove this concept in which the 'TEAM' is in very large print and the 'me' is only one inch tall on the shirt. In a family, everyone has a job, a duty, a role and the same thing is true on a football team. We have really good players: the starters, the reserves, the scout

team players, the kickers, etc. If we work hard together, we can all be great at our roles and succeed as a team. We help each other out in all situations from car-pooling to making sure all of the family is there at practices or in the weight room (or at a funeral), or to console each other after a game or practice (or now with our latest tragedy). If a member isn't there, we are powerless and do not improve. It has become a powerful thing that we practice and play hard to improve for the person next to us, not for ourselves individually. Our brotherhood has become unbreakable, to the point of never forgetting one another and relying on each other in the future. Example: Over 20 ex-players came to the showing and/or funeral to give us support. They felt it too. The family never ends."

The Friday after Colton passed away the community came together as one family. Bedford was set to play Monroe Jefferson. Bedford was undefeated but the team considered a forfeit in light of the tragedy. At the Durbin's family's urging, the players voted to play as scheduled and honor Colton. The Durbin family was in the stands to cheer on their son and brother's team. Monroe Jefferson honored our fallen brother by wearing red to honor Colton. The players, students, and staff (especially their athletic director, John Scharf) were very supportive of our Bedford team. Bedford senior players walked on the field carrying Colton's jersey while the announcer said, "Starting for our Lord in Heaven, senior defensive back, 6'2," 165 pound, Mr. Colton Durbin." The boys played for their brother and won the game 49-0. A sea of red could be seen on the home and visitor sides of the field. Our students had signs that said CD3, which stands for Colton Durbin and his football number. Football players, cheerleaders, and students came together at the end of the game and put their thumb and index finger together to raise the remaining three fingers for Colton's jersey number. This was the same gesture they made at the vigil the night before. There wasn't a dry eye in the stadium.

Schools across Michigan and Ohio wore red, made signs, or wore the number 3 to honor Colton for Friday night football. Schools as far away as Broken Arrow, Oklahoma wore the number 3 on their helmets. Devin Gardner, quarterback for University of Michigan, tweeted, "Thoughts and prayers go out to Colton Durbin's family and the students and faculty at Bedford for the loss of their brother and friend." Over 40 schools did something to honor Colton and show their support for Bedford. It was heartwarming and much appreciated by Colton's family, friends, teachers, and coaches. The bands from Bedford and Jefferson shook hands. The Jefferson cheerleaders greeted our Bedford cheerleaders and wore red ribbons in honor of Colton. This was the same support Bedford had seen a few weeks earlier. Christina Canales, Bedford freshmen cheer coach, said, "When Kelsey passed away the Whitmer cheerleaders (from

Toledo) came to my practice and sent their condolences and gave flowers to Kyla (Bedford freshman cheerleader) since she was with her (Kelsey) when it happened." Many of the surrounding schools wore blue shirts in honor of Kelsey. Blue was Kelsey's favorite color and all the students wore the blue shirts to school and to the football game the Friday after she passed away.

The support of the Bedford family has not only been felt in the athletic and academic world. Many businesses in and around Bedford have a message of support for Colton and his family on their signs. Clerks in stores have CD3 on their nametags. A local bank is taking donations for the family. The Sign Lady on Telegraph Road offered to put CD3 on the sleeve of any Bedford shirt that people brought to them. Thursday and Friday after Colton passed away, they did 1,500 shirts and another 500 since then. The Sign Lady has even put Kelsey on some shirts for people that wanted to honor her too. They have sold 1,800 playoff shirts that have "Family" on the back. Red t-shirts were also made that say "Play for CD" on the front and "Family 3" on the back. 1,100 of those shirts have been sold and they are not done yet.

Bedford is working very hard at recovering from the past few weeks and it has not been easy. A grief support group, Gabby's Ladder from Monroe, offered grief counseling to students and staff at Bedford after both losses, and the caring school counselors have taken over from there trying to help everyone find a way to move forward. Hundreds of people attended the visitation and funeral of Colton. Football players from neighboring communities, former students, current students, Bedford staff, and many others came out to support the Durbin family. It was the same for Kelsey's funeral. As tragic as these losses have been on Bedford's community, knowing we are there for each other and knowing we are Bedford family, will help heal the hurt.



- Courtesy photos



~ REPRINTED FROM THE NOV. 4-17, 2013 ISSUE OF THE BEDFORD PRESS ~