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Missouri swimmer's suicide might draw attention to disorder



Sasha Menu Courey, left and below, was a popular member of the Missouri swim team known for her vivacious personality and booming laugh. She suffered from borderline personality disorder, and on June 17 committed suicide. Her parents hope Menu Courey's death can bring attention to BPD, which often causes its victims to hurt themselves.

Story

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By David Briggs

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Sasha Menu Courey loved college life at Missouri.

She was a swimmer with Olympic ambitions but rarely missed a chance to set free a laugh so booming that it seemed to rattle the ceiling of teammates a floor below at Johnston Hall. The sophomore greeted friends — everybody counted as one — as if they were just the person she was hoping to see.



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"It was always, 'Heyyy!'" said MU swimmer Caitlin Connor, who met Menu Courey before a home football game their freshman year when she and her roommate from 233 Johnston searched out the source of the bursting cheer in Room 333. "She would talk to you like she had known you her whole life."

In the classroom, Menu Courey earned a 4.0 GPA her first semester and was already planning for graduate school. The aspiring psychologist had lined up a prestigious internship this summer researching treatment for alcoholism.

"Everything she touched," said her mother, Lynn Courey, "she was doing great."

But this spring, Menu Courey fell into the grip of an illness she had kept hidden from the world.

Menu Courey committed suicide June 17 in a suburban Boston hospital. She was 20.

When a series of events one friend described as the "perfect storm" reached a crest, she slipped into a deep depression from which she would never escape.

Menu Courey left the team on March 21. She spent the next 10 days under watch and treatment at the MU Psychiatric Center, where her parents said she was diagnosed with borderline personality disorder, an illness characterized by extreme emotional instability.

Lynn flew in from the family's Toronto home to be with her daughter when she was released. By then, however, she said she no longer recognized Sasha. Though Sasha often put on a cheerful front to keep friends and family from worrying, she bore an emotional pain too great to endure.

"We have difficulty understanding, as well, what happened," Lynn said. "My daughter really had a great will to live, and suddenly she had a will to die."

Now, Menu Courey's family is celebrating a life that brought joy to so many while searching for answers and striving to raise awareness of a disorder they knew little about until it was too late.

Borderline personality disorder affects 2 percent of adults, according to the National Institute of Mental Health. The illness leads a majority of patients to hurt themselves and about 10 percent to commit suicide. Yet while it is as prevalent as bipolar disorder and more common than schizophrenia, far less research is conducted on BPD, said Dr. Andrew Ekblad, a psychologist at the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health in Toronto. Proper treatment can be difficult to find.

As an organ donor, Menu Courey's heart has already helped save the life of a 26-year-old man. Her parents hope her story saves more.

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Menu Courey was always happiest in the pool, where she thrived most of her life.

Mike Menu remembers being alongside Sasha, the oldest of he and Lynn's two daughters, for her first big race win. At a 10-and-under provincial competition in Toronto, she pushed past her rivals in the 50-meter breaststroke at the last moment to touch first by the length of a hand.

"It was just an unbelievable moment," Mike Menu said. "We knew she had something special."

With broad shoulders and an athletic build, Menu Courey proved a natural sprinter. She was anchoring relays on her club's 17-and-under team by the time she was 12 and developed into one of Canada's top youth swimmers. She qualified in six events at the 2008 Canadian National Championships and placed ninth in the 100 individual medley.

"Swimming was her life," said Mike Menu, a computer consultant in Toronto.

Several colleges in the U.S. showed interest, but signing with Missouri was an easy choice. Menu Courey liked the campus, the coaches and the team, which she knew would include fellow Canadians Lauren Lavigna and Dominique Bouchard.

"I never got the feeling that she wanted to be anywhere else," said former Missouri Coach Brian Hoffer, who resigned late in the 2010 season.

Though she was ruled ineligible her freshman season because of paperwork issues, Hoffer was impressed by her times in practice. He expected her to contribute on the Tigers' top relay teams in 2011.

Those plans stalled last summer when Menu Courey suffered a hairline vertebrae fracture and two herniated discs during training. Her parents said the injury got worse, keeping her out of the water for much of last season.

Through the disappointment, Menu Courey remained the same vivacious teammate. Connor said she was a friend who was "so concerned with what was going on in your life."

The laugh was the same, too.

It came when she tore through a foot of snow last winter wearing only her Missouri swim cap and a sky blue bikini; when she and Connor had only 15 minutes to sprint from English class clear across campus to the athletic training complex for a 2 p.m. weight workout; when she snuck her

beloved guinea pig, Maxwell, onto the pool deck one day and set it loose to run along the gutter as her teammates practiced.

"There's never a time that we saw her pouting," Connor said.

Menu Courey kept busy last semester with internship applications and a psychology research position. She was "as good of a model as they come," said Meghan Anderson, an academic coordinator who works with the swim team.

"She was on a roll," her mother said. "Then things crashed."

■

Her parents said Menu Courey felt alone the day she lost control of her life. The stresses had steadily — and quietly — mounted.

The injury affected her more than she revealed, her parents said. Suddenly she was without her compass, the activity that brought her more than 800 miles from home.

Then she was without a home, displaced after her father said a conflict with a new roommate made Menu Courey too uncomfortable to stay at her off-campus residence. Her old roommate, a swimmer, had graduated in December. She spent her final weeks on campus living on teammates' couches.

When Menu Courey and her boyfriend broke up March 21, she was inconsolable.

"It was the end of her world," Lynn said.

Menu Courey spent the next 10 days at the MU Psychiatric Center, but her anguish only intensified. The next time Lynn saw her daughter, "all she wanted to do was to die." Menu Courey attempted to commit suicide two days after she was released, her father said.

Their daughter was sent to a hospital in Kansas City, and Mike and Lynn increasingly learned about borderline personality disorder. Ekblad said BPD is marked by patients' inability to regulate their emotions. They are prone to extreme mood swings, impulsive behavior and a distorted self-image. Even the smallest perceived slight can lead to acute feelings of rejection.

Those with the illness can lead successful and contented lives with treatment, particularly a system known as Dialectical Behavior Therapy. Yet patients with BPD often face fewer options than others battling mental illness. At some treatment centers in Canada, Ekblad said there is a two-year waiting list for BPD patients to receive intensive inpatient treatment.

Not long ago, a diagnosis of BPD was viewed as a "death sentence," Dr. Kenneth Silk, a professor at the University of Michigan, wrote in a 2008 issue of the American Journal of Psychiatry. Resources devoted to the illness are only beginning to catch up.

Menu Courey's parents said the only seeming option was to uproot their lives and enroll their daughter at McLean Hospital in Belmont, Mass., a leader in the treatment of BPD.

The treatment was voluntary, and Menu Courey seemed to be improving. She talked to friends about returning to Missouri, posted messages about her faith on Facebook and was preparing to switch to outpatient treatment in Toronto.

Menu Courey planned to live across the street from Connor next year. They talked every night at 9 when Menu Courey was in Kansas City and weekly when she was in Boston.

"She would put on this front where you couldn't see" the pain, Connor said. "I don't think she hid it because she was embarrassed, she just didn't want anybody to worry about her. ... I had it set in my mind that she would come back."

"That's what she was aiming towards," MU Coach Greg Rhodenbaugh said.

Privately, however, Menu Courey struggled with the prospect of leaving Boston. BPD patients often become attached to their treatment. Her journal entries later revealed that she decided the transition to Toronto would be too painful.

Menu Courey's death devastated her family, including younger sister, Kayla. Yet through the grief came comfort in the overwhelming support that followed. The Menu Courey family will be in town Wednesday for a memorial service at the Newman Center.

"This is when we saw how important she was to a lot of people that we didn't know," Lynn said. "If those friends weren't there, I don't think we would have been able to survive this. The help has been pouring in, it's been incredible. Her passing was not in vain."

A gift gone too soon continues to give. Her family hopes to learn more in the coming weeks about the man who received Menu Courey's heart. They have started the Sasha Menu Courey Fund to increase awareness of BPD. The fund had already surpassed the goal of \$5,000. Donations can be made at www.mshfoundation.ca/fonds-sashamenucourey.

"Too many kids are going through this kind of suffering, and it's not a reason for them to die," Lynn said. "With the future Sasha had, she should be alive today."

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