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Hope is swimmer's death opens dialogue



August Kryger

Lynn Courey, left, shares a moment with Dana Sheahan during the memorial service for Courey's daughter, former MJ swimmer Sasha Menu Courey, who ended her life June 17. Lynn Courey said she hopes her daughter's death will help others see the importance of proper treatment for borderline personality disorder.

By David Briggs

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It would have been understandable — even expected — if the family of late Missouri swimmer Sasha Menu Courey had kept the circumstances of her death last month private.

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Mental illness retains a distinct stigma in society, often perceived as a weakness and a malady that affects only the dark fringes of our communities. It is a difficult topic to discuss.

But attitudes cannot fully change until the dialogue enters the public realm. Through tragedy, Menu Courey's parents recognize they have been given a powerful platform.

Mike Menu and Lynn Courey chose to share their daughter's story.

They started a charitable fund to raise awareness of borderline personality disorder, the illness Sasha was battling when she ended her life June

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17 in a suburban Boston hospital. They spent hours detailing for me her sudden descent from a beloved team leader with perfect grades into an inescapable grip of depression. And they spoke with Father Thomas Saucier, who highlighted one of many misconceptions of diseases like BPD during a poignant memorial service yesterday at the Newman Center.

“Somehow even today, we still perceive mental illness almost as something one chooses,” Saucier said.

Truth is, mental health issues transcend every dividing line of society. Nearly eight percent of Americans ages 18-25 live with a serious mental illness, the National Institute of Mental Health reports. Even the most well-adjusted college athlete is not exempt.

Menu Courey is only the latest example.

Yesterday, her family, friends and coaches remembered the sophomore as the heartbeat of the Missouri swimming team.

Assistant coach Patrick Rowan, who recruited Menu Courey, fought back tears to recount the first time he called her Toronto home. He expected to be greeted with a soft voice and “yes” or “no” responses. Most teenage prospects raced to get off the phone.

“Not Sasha,” he said.

His cell phone battery nearly died.

“Her personality and laugh came leaping through the phone,” Rowan said. “She dominated the call.”

The first time he picked her up at the airport, Menu Courey bypassed the customary handshake for a hug. And she was the same with everyone — even the pet guinea pig she bought on a whim last semester.

When her teammate and roommate, Mary Sheahen, considered giving away Chewbacca — the guinea pig Sheahen bought as a playmate for Maxwell — Menu Courey was stunned.

“Why?” she said, Sheahen recalled with a smile. “She’s your baby. She loves you. You’ve got to love her back.”

Teammates said nobody loved college more. In school, the aspiring psychologist earned a 4.0 GPA her first semester and was already preparing for graduate school. At the pool, where she was unable to compete because of paperwork issues as a freshman and a back injury last season, her encouraging cheers and laugh echoed loudest. Rowan called Menu Courey his assistant recruiter.

“Every recruiting weekend, she wanted to know everything that was going on,” he said. “I don’t think anybody loved recruiting weekends more than Sasha. It was a chance for her to meet people.”

She was a portrait of joy and kindness, with a vast support system of family, friends, teammates, coaches, academic counselors and professors. And yet ...

“Who would have ever imagined that behind that smile and laughter was such pain and hurt?” Saucier said.

There is no shame, he reminded the gathering, in seeking help during times of need. When parishioners visit him for counseling, he responds, “Why didn’t you do it sooner?”

It is a good message. So is the call for increased awareness of BPD, an illness characterized by an inability to regulate intense emotions. Not long ago, the disorder was seen as the “leprosy” of psychiatric diagnoses, writes Dr. Joyce Burland of the National Alliance on Mental Illness. She was warned early in her career to “stay away from the borderlines.”

It is time to wipe away the hush-hush stigma. While the statistics remain grim — about 10 percent of BPD patients commit suicide — and doctors agree much more research must be devoted to the illness, patients can lead successful lives with treatment.

Menu Courey’s family hopes her story will help the movement.

They should be commended for their bravery.

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