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Missouri swimmer's death gives life to another

Former Missouri swimmer's death gives life to another.



Former Missouri swimmer Sasha Menu Courey suffered from borderline personality disorder and committed suicide in June. The recipient of her donated heart reached out to Menu Courey's parents to thank them.

By David Briggs

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Lynn Courey's hands shook as she opened the letter from the nameless 26-year-old man.

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"Please let me express my condolences," the typed, one-page note began.

Seven months earlier, her daughter, Sasha Menu Courey, had spiraled from a student with perfect grades and a promising future on the Missouri swim team into a virtual stranger in the clutch of mental illness. Menu Courey committed suicide June 17.

But this was a missive of hope. authored by the man whose life their daughter saved.

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[Missouri Swimmer Sasha Menu Courey Dies](#) [June 20, 2011]

After Menu Courey ingested 100 pills of Extra Strength Tylenol in a suburban Boston psychiatric hospital, her body steadily failed. The liver went first, then the brain. She went into septic shock, the damage so complete that only one organ could potentially be salvaged.

As the 20-year-old Missouri sophomore and a stranger lay dying, Lynn Courey and Mike Menu determined one of them would live. They gave doctors permission to transplant Menu Courey's heart.

The note, sent last month through the New England Donor Bank to their Toronto home, was to say, "THANK YOU."

"Because you made the selfless decision you did ... I am here today," the letter read. "On June 18, 2011, I received the heart that I had been waiting, hoping and praying for."

It was a reminder of the ways Menu Courey, described by former MU teammate Ashley Patterson as the most caring person she's ever met, continues to give.

Her legacy endures: in the heartbeat of a man who proposed to his girlfriend in the fall; in the crusade of two parents to raise awareness for a little-known disorder; and in the spirit of the Missouri swim team.

The Tigers are dedicating this season to the memory of Menu Courey. After one recent meet, junior Joe Hladik wrote on a Facebook memorial page, "That 19.9 was for you sash!!! I knew you were with me! I love you so much and I know you'd be freaking out with me!"

This week, as Missouri hosts the Big 12 Swimming and Diving Championships, the 18th-ranked women's team will write "SMC" on their biceps in black permanent marker before each day of competition.

"She would be so mad at all of us right now if she knew how upset we were," said Patterson, who still weeps every time Menu Courey's favorite song, Train's "Hey, Soul Sister," plays on the radio. "She touched this whole entire team with her energy and her amusement by life."

The irony both haunts and uplifts her family. Lynn Courey and Mike Menu continue to find comfort in how much their daughter meant to so many.

They are determined to share her story. They want others to know there is hope for those suffering from borderline personality disorder, an illness characterized by extreme emotional instability that leads three in four patients to self-injure, according to the National Alliance on Mental Illness.

"We didn't want it to be a movie with just a sad ending," Mike Menu said.

As Menu Courey's parents contemplate the events of last spring and confront disturbing new details — gleaned through Sasha's cell phone and the diary she kept at McLean Hospital in Belmont, Mass. — they believe her fate could have been different.

From the darkness came many lessons.

Among them is the nature of BPD, which affects 2 percent of adults.

Menu Courey was a model in the classroom — the aspiring psychologist earned a 4.0 GPA her first semester at Missouri and was already planning for graduate school — and a natural in social situations.

Friends recalled Menu Courey's wall-rattling laugh and her sincere concern for their lives. When Tigers assistant Patrick Rowan first called the highly regarded Canadian prospect to gauge her interest in MU — a routine recruiting call generally laced with one-word answers from teenagers eager to get off the phone — she nearly drained his cell-phone battery. The first time Rowan met her at the airport, she burst into his arms.

Menu Courey loved everything about MU, down to the winter weather that reminded her of home. During a snowstorm her freshman year, she raced to Patterson's door in Johnston Hall.

"She dragged me outside," Patterson said, laughing. "She was in a tank top and shorts. It was our first snow day for both of us, and she was screaming and running around playing in the snow."

But unknown to her friends, Menu Courey battled deeply buried demons.

One warning sign her parents believe doctors missed came in 2007. Menu Courey sunk into a depression while training away from home in Montreal, stressed by the end of a relationship, an injury and sudden uncertainty in her living situation. She took a handful of painkiller pills before calling for emergency help.

Menu Courey returned to Toronto to visit a psychiatrist. The diagnosis: common "teenage angst."

It was not until last March that it became clear she needed extensive treatment.

Like in 2007, Menu Courey was buffeted by a storm of personal trauma. A hairline vertebrae fracture and two herniated discs kept her from training. She was displaced from her off-campus residence after a disagreement with a new roommate. And she and her boyfriend split up.

Menu Courey also wrote in her diary months later that she was sexually assaulted at the end of her freshman year. She did not name the attacker.

On March 21, Menu Courey called her parents. She was headed to the emergency room.

"Mama, don't worry," she told her mother. "Everything will be just fine."

But that wasn't the case.

Menu Courey spent the next 10 days at the MU Psychiatric Center, where she was diagnosed with BPD and her anguish only increased. Her parents believe she was permitted to interact alone with unstable fellow patients. (MU Health cannot comment on specific cases.)

Menu Courey attempted to commit suicide two days after she was released, her mother said, following detailed instructions sent via text from another recently released ward patient.

"All she had was a will to die," Lynn Courey said, "and I couldn't understand what happened."

As Menu Courey was rushed to a hospital in Kansas City, her parents considered their treatment options.

Patients with BPD can lead successful lives with treatment, especially a system known as dialectical behavior therapy. But their access to care lags behind those with more widely researched but less common illnesses such as schizophrenia.

Menu Courey could not find an available treatment center in Canada, which they learned was a common problem. Dr. Andrew Ekblad, a psychologist at the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health in Toronto, said last year there is a two-year waiting list at some hospitals for BPD patients to receive intensive inpatient treatment.

Lynn Courey and Mike Menu felt their only choice was to uproot to suburban Boston. At McLean, Menu Courey improved, writing the treatment felt like "breathing air."

But the progress was temporary. The treatment cost \$44,000 for 28 days. With the care not covered by insurance, her parents could not afford to remain in Boston. They planned to transition her to Toronto — a prospect Menu Courey struggled with in part because she came to realize the financial toll of her illness.

In late May, she escaped the hospital's grounds during an unsupervised walk on the campus and purchased the Tylenol at a local store. Her parents suspect she hid the pills outside the hospital building to escape a body search after returning about an hour later. Menu Courey saw the pain relievers as insurance for a time when her suffering became too great to endure.

"She could not see light at the end of the tunnel for her transition," Mike Menu said.

Before Menu Courey grew delirious and entered into a coma the day before she died, she apologized to her parents.

"Mama and papa," she said, her mother recalled, "I'm really sorry that I broke your trust. I just didn't want to be a burden to you guys."

"It hurt so much to hear that," Lynn Courey said. "As much as she had her demons, she didn't want to be a burden to us. As much as it was difficult, we never saw it as a burden."

■

Lynn Courey and Mike Menu hope to soon meet the man whom their daughter gave life.

They read his letter over and over. The man, who remains anonymous, was diagnosed in college with a heart muscle disease known as cardiomyopathy. The same condition that took his mother was steadily deteriorating when he learned his prayer for a new heart had been answered.

He recalled awaking for the first time five days after the surgery. He asked for ear plugs.

"When I put them in, I heard my new heart beat for the first time," he wrote. "The first thing I did was say a prayer for your loved one and your family."

The pulse, he wrote, evoked the passage on his mother's gravestone: "I shall pass through this world but once. If therefore there be any kindness I can show or any good deed I can do, let me do it now; Let me not defer it or neglect it, for I shall not pass this way again."

Menu Courey's parents approach their next undertaking with the same purpose.

They feel an obligation to save others through their heartbreak. They believe better, more widely available treatment for BPD patients is needed.

Already, there has been progress. The Sasha Menu Courey Fund has nearly quadrupled its original fundraising goal of \$5,000 to increase awareness of BPD. McLean Hospital recently established a scholarship for families in need to extend their stay.

And Menu Courey's parents have lined up speaking engagements at Toronto-area high schools.

They will begin telling their daughter's story this spring.

"I will only stop when I expire," Lynn Courey said. "This is the only way for us to move on."

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