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Tonganoxie holds special graduation for a student whose battle against cancer inspires many
By LISA GUTIERREZ

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Tonganoxie holds special graduation for a student whose battle against cancer inspires many. Connor Olson graduated from Tonganoxie High School on Thursday. He was the only graduate.

He brought his parents, his grandma — and his hospice nurse.

Connor has spent an exhaustive year fighting bone cancer, with one round of chemo, radiation and surgery after another. Forty weeks in the hospital over the last year.

His condition worsened in recent weeks. Then, over the weekend, the 18-year-old, newly minted Eagle Scout suffered a stroke that paralyzed his left side and left him largely unable to speak.

On Wednesday, the principal and faculty of the school arranged a spur-of-the-moment graduation ceremony for Connor because he never took his eyes off the prize.

His diploma.

“Connor was dealt an incredibly poor hand, but Connor was dealt four aces when it comes to his attitude toward life and his respect for others,” said the high school’s principal, Jamie Carlisle.

Connor learned of his cancer last year in what was an emotionally punishing time for the Leavenworth County town and its high school.

Last April 17, Jeremy Elliott, a classmate and close friend of Connor’s, died in his sleep because of a heart condition.

Another boy, Jake Ostermeyer, needed a transplant due to a kidney ailment. Yet another boy, Austin Stone, fell into a coma after his wisdom teeth were removed.

The string of events led the school to create Team Tongie, an organization that has raised thousands of dollars for those boys, their families and others in need.

The high school let out early Thursday so that Connor’s friends could watch him get his diploma.

So by the time he made his way into the auditorium, more than 500 people — classmates, neighbors, school board members, people who have raised money for his medical bills — were waiting for him.

Connor’s teachers, wearing black graduation gowns, stood in a big semicircle in front of the stage, most of them blinking back and wiping tears from their eyes.

As “Pomp and Circumstance” began to play, the audience stood.

Connor was wheeled down the aisle, flanked by eight of his friends, surrounding him like a security detail.

He wore a red cap and gown, the same as his fellow seniors will wear next month when they graduate. A red-and-white crocheted blanket covered his lap.

The stage had a wheelchair lift, but Connor's friends decided they wanted to carry him onto the stage.

"He has lifted us up so much," childhood friend Nic Irick said afterward.

So they carried him in his wheelchair up the six steps and wheeled him to his place of honor. The boys sat behind him, close and protective.

They had worked out a hand signal system. Connor, on a morphine drip, would hold up one finger if the pain was bearable. Two if it was too much. He never showed two.

Connor never opened his eyes, but he could hear everything that was about to happen.

His friend Lindsey Fatherly, the senior class president, took the lectern. She said that she and Connor had spent a lot of time together over the past days, and she mentioned the many times that Connor had "raised the roof" for his schoolmates.

"If I could have everyone stand up," she said, "and raise the roof."

The crowd jumped to its feet, exploding into applause that was sustained, deafening.

After the school's Chieftain singers performed the national anthem, the lights dimmed and a screen dropped over the stage next to Connor. The slide-show images contrasted sharply with the Connor in the wheelchair.

There was Connor in grade school, missing a front tooth. In the slides, he grew older. He started wearing glasses, and his hair became redder.

There he was under a pile of friends on the sofa. Smiling and standing in front of this same auditorium stage, his prosthetic leg in full view and his crutches raised over his head in triumph.

From last year, wearing the red homecoming crown on top of his bald head.

Photos from just a few days ago, when he went to watch the University of Kansas football team practice. At the behest of head coach Turner Gill, Connor gave an impromptu and impassioned speech to the team about squeezing the most out of life. The team was so touched that it sent Lee Fobbs, in charge of player development, to the ceremony.

When the time came, Carlisle asked Connor: "Are you ready to walk across the stage?"

Without opening his eyes, Connor lifted his right hand from his lap and flashed a thumbs-up.

The audience exploded into applause.

One of his buddies wheeled him across the stage; the others stood close behind.

Connor Olson. A graduate of Tonganoxie High School. Class of 2010.

One of the boys reached down and flipped Connor's red-and-white tassel from right to left. Someone in the audience yelled: "You're the man, Connor!"

The boys pushed him off the stage into a hallway, where Connor's father, Martin Olson, gave his son a sip of water.

Olson told the boys that when the school contacted them on Tuesday about wanting to have a graduation ceremony for Connor, he and his wife were unsure.

"Sandy and I thought, 'No way. He's in excruciating pain. He feels like crap.' But he said, 'No, I want to walk across the stage' ... and it was just by sheer determination," Olson told the boys, thanking them for their support.

One by one, the boys leaned down and hugged their buddy.

"Get some rest," one whispered to him.

Another boy walked away and collapsed in tears into his own mother's arms.

They didn't see the toll the ceremony had taken on their friend.

As two attendants lifted Connor from his wheelchair onto a gurney for the ride home with his hospice nurse, he moaned.

And as pillows were slipped underneath his head and his amputated leg, Connor said something that sounded like "home."

"We're going home," Martin Olson told his son. "We'll be there in a minute."

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