

Lasting legacy

Governor's school senior works to educate others after brother's overdose death

BY HILARY HOLLADAY
Staff Writer

When Hannah Howard awoke on May 8, 2019, it felt like an ordinary day. At home in Gordonsville with her father and older brother, the Orange County High School junior was going to get ready for school.

Then she heard her father yell out sharply. She had no idea what had happened; she thought maybe he had stubbed his toe or suffered some other minor inconvenience.

"And then I heard the ambulance and I knew," she said during a recent interview at the high school. "I looked out my window, and my dad was outside pacing. I ran downstairs, and [my brother] was laying in our laundry room and the EMS guy looked at

me and was like, 'I'm so sorry.' The only thing I could think at that moment was, 'Oh my God.'"

Devon Howard, 27, was dead of a drug overdose. The way Hannah tells it, what her brother surely thought was heroin was actually fentanyl, an extremely potent painkiller and a lethal ingredient in the national opioid epidemic.

In the weeks that followed, Hannah mourned the loss of her brother while enduring a barrage of "rumors and speculations" about him. Although she and her mother posted a brief notice online to ward off unkind and thoughtless remarks, she still heard about what people were saying on social media. And it hurt.

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PHOTO BY HILARY HOLLADAY

Orange County High School student Hannah Howard talks with OCHS marketing teacher Whitney Milbourne. Howard's Blue Ridge Virtual Governor's School legacy project entails training classmates on the administration of Narcan in the event of an overdose.

She describes her brother as the “life of every party” with a contagious smile and deep love for his family and friends: “My brother wasn’t just a drug addict. He was *Devon*.”

“We always joke that to know Devon was to love Devon,” she said, her somber expression momentarily giving way to delight.

Although the two were 10 years apart in age, they were close. According to family lore that Hannah repeats with tears sparkling in her eyes, he hadn’t wanted a baby sister, but after she was born, “he just loved me.”

A series of losses proved devastating. A beloved aunt died in 2000. Devon and Hannah’s half-sister was murdered in 2006. Their grandparents died; their parents divorced.

“It was just one traumatic thing after another,” Hannah said, “and he started with prescription pills.”

A way to cope and help others

Hannah, 18, has one surviving sibling, a 41-year-old half-brother who lives in Richmond. Her mother works for Region 10 in Charlottesville at a residential treatment center for women recovering from drug addiction.

As an OCHS student enrolled in the Blue Ridge Virtual Governor’s School, Hannah plans to attend a four-year college, possibly Virginia Commonwealth University, and major in psychology with a concentration in mental health and substance abuse.

For now, as a way to cope with Devon’s death, she has thrown herself into her governor’s school senior legacy project, a graduation requirement designed to benefit future generations. The first part of the project involved an internship with Addiction Allies, a rehab facility in Charlottesville. She learned about the recovery process and talked with people trying to recover from drug addiction.

“I feel like the main thing that people feel when their loved one is an addict is shame. And it was through talking to them that I realized that it’s not something to be ashamed of. It’s a disease and they need help.”

“If they can put themselves through that ...”

Although some might think patients in rehab are fundamentally weak, Howard came away with the opposite impression. She met people at Addiction Allies who had suffered so much it was as if they’d been “to hell and back.” Each with a different story to tell, they all faced an uphill battle as they weathered withdrawal symptoms and the persistent desire for their drug of choice. Yet they fought on, trying as best they could to conquer their addictions.

“If they can put themselves through that,” she said, “I should be able to run miles!”

In addition to the internship, she wrote a research paper on how to

save lives by administering naloxone, an antidote commonly known by the brand name Narcan. She has been trained to administer the remedy, which can halt an overdose and save the victim’s life.

As part of her training in a course offered by Region 10, she learned how to teach others the same technique. That knowledge provides the groundwork for the community service component of her project. She led a 90-minute instruction session for the Orange County Youth Council and plans to lead another at the high school.

To raise awareness of the session, she and her governor’s school classmates have gotten the word out online, and with the encouragement and support of her teachers, she has given talks about the upcoming training session in various classes. So far, more than 200 students have told her they want to become certified to administer Narcan.

Many of those students revealed they had family members with addiction problems; some said they’d lost people to overdoses.

“You’d be surprised,” she said, by how many local students have family members struggling with addiction.

In the training session, students learn the signs of an overdose, how to tell the difference between someone who has overdosed and someone who is high on drugs, and the different types of opioid drugs and their

street names. They also learn how to administer Narcan, available as a nasal spray and an injection. Howard said it’s the “exact same” remedy that EMTs use when they treat someone who has overdosed.

Self-motivated and a big help to the team

When she’s not in class or working on her project, Howard often is busy as a team manager. She manages the boys’ basketball and baseball teams, an activity she said she greatly enjoys.

Adam Utz, who coaches both teams, speaks highly of the young woman who has assisted him since her first year of high school. He describes her as self-motivated, driven and a big help to him and the players. With his current team in the midst of a highly successful season, he said, “My basketball program wouldn’t be anywhere near what it is now without Hannah.”

Her extracurricular activities and career plans make it obvious Howard likes to help people and see them succeed. Through her governor’s school legacy project, she is working to educate her peers so they can save a life if they ever encounter someone who has overdosed.

“I just would hate for it to happen to somebody else,” she said of the horror of losing her brother. “I just don’t want to see anybody else ever go through that pain.”

School starts Monday!

Teachers, staff
prepare for
year unlike
any other

BY HILARY HOLLADAY

Staff Writer

On Monday afternoon at Orange County High School, teachers were in their classrooms preparing for the first day of school. In some ways, it was business as usual as they wrote up lesson plans and arranged tables and chairs for their students. In other ways, it had all the markings of the pandemic in progress.

Biology teacher Renee Filep put on her mask for an interview and explained that she's trying to figure out how best to interact with her students when a handful will be spread out in a large classroom and the rest will be gazing at her from a computer screen.

For Filep, the tricky part will be determining whether those "little faces on the screen" are truly engaged. "I want to make sure they're into what I'm teaching, not just giving me answers," she said.

The Orange County Public Schools currently are offering Virtual OC, which allows students to do all their work online, and a blended model, which



Orange County High School faculty and staff were busy Monday afternoon getting things ready for students to return to school Aug. 24. With Orange County Schools offering a hybrid instructional model this fall, currently 535 OCHS students have signed up for virtual learning, while 931 students plan to attend in person one day per week. Pictured above, biology teacher Renee Filep prepares her classroom for the students' return. At left, Custodian Jamie Verling is new on the job at Orange County High School. He is among those responsible for keeping the building clean as the school prepares for the first day of school on Monday.

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PHOTOS BY HILARY HOLLADAY

lets students attend school in person one or two days per week, depending on their grade level, and work remotely the rest of the time.

At OCHS, there are currently 535 students signed up for Virtual OC and 931 students planning to attend in person one day per week, according to Principal Wendell Green.

Based on her current class enrollments, Filep expects to see five students in person during her first class of the day on Monday, four in her second class and then, after her third-period planning block, she will greet two students in person during fourth block. The rest of her students will attend online.

"I can juggle 20 people in here," she said, gesturing toward her classroom, where a handful of students will be spaced six feet apart from each other. "It's the split aspect I'm worried about. To do some online, some offline—it's going to be really, really challenging."

Filep said students in her anatomy and physiology classes who attend in person will be able to hold the bones of a skeleton and get her hands-on help with lab experiments. Online students will miss out on that.

Given the unpredictability of COVID-19 and the abrupt retrenchment to online learning elsewhere in the country, Filep added that she is uncertain whether the county's blended, or hybrid, model will last long. In her view, it's not just the virus that could shut down in-person attendance. She said students who attend in person will be disappointed by the tiny classes that keep socializing to a minimum. Students also will be required to eat lunch at their desks rather than mingling freely with their friends.

"More and more, they're going to switch to totally online," she predicted.

Elsewhere in the building, Nicole Lohr was deep into planning how she would teach cooking and sewing to online students. It's one thing when you can hand someone an electric mixer in the kitchen or hover nearby while students work at sewing machines. It's quite another to demonstrate cooking and sewing via video demonstration.

Lohr said that in pre-covid days, her students spent most of their time in class doing hands-on activities and only about 30% of the time on

computers.

This fall she's scheduled to teach three sections of independent living and one of child development. (Lohr took on an extra class to meet the needs of incoming freshmen.) On Mondays, she expects to meet one student in person and 25 online for her first-block class. The number attending in person rises to five or six on different days and for different sections.

Lohr admitted that her hopes for the blended program have been in flux.

She said her spirits dropped the day she learned that only one student will be allowed to use a restroom at a time and a custodian must go in and clean the facilities after each student. On that day, she thought, "I don't see it working."

But by Monday, she was willing to put her level of optimism at six on a scale of one to 10. On the one hand, she said, "I know our students and they're not going to like [the blended approach] and why would you, when you can stay home?"

But on the other hand, "A lot of students need to come to school to get that confidence that says, 'Yes, you're doing this just fine,' because they don't get it at home."

"Not a regular instructional day"

Teresa Muse, who teaches world history and psychology, pointed out that even when students are attending in person, they will mostly be working online. No matter what class it is, the human contact will supplement the instructional content on the laptops that the schools are providing free of charge to students.

"Kids will be in class on a computer. It's not going to be a regular instructional day in my classroom," Muse said.

With 15 years at OCHS, she said she loves teaching but is worried about the unusual new school year, set to begin Monday. She said she's feeling "a lot of frustration, concern and anxiety" related to the deadly virus and the uncertainties surrounding the school division's reopening plans.

Driving home that message, special education teacher and president of the Orange County Education Association John Lyon sent an open letter to the school board in late July. Cосigned by more than 70 teachers,



PHOTO BY JEFF POOLE

Gordon-Barbour Elementary School Principal Nick Sodano prepares health and safety materials for students and staff. He said that as of Monday afternoon, 78 students at the Gordonsville school were signed up for all-virtual learning, while about 200 were planning to attend in-person two days per week.

the letter states, in part, "We believe that learning is essential and that we have the dedication to plan relevant and rigorous virtual learning opportunities for all students. To make this model work, we need time, planning and training in research-based practices. Your leadership can make this happen. With that in mind, we call on you to pivot to a virtual reopening in the fall and partner directly with teachers and families so that we can prepare and design rigorous, equitable virtual instruction for all students.

"Public schools and their teachers are tasked with mitigating the damage of ineffective social systems across our nation. We are the providers of first responses to illnesses of the body and soul, not to mention a source of nutritional and social stability for our most vulnerable community members. A plan for virtual learning is safest for our entire community."

Lyon said he heard back from two of the board members: chair and District 2 representative Sherrie Page and District 5 representative Jim

Hopkins.

There currently are no plans to retreat to the all-online model used last spring when Gov. Ralph Northam shuttered schools across the state in response to the pandemic. Orange County Superintendent of Schools Dr. Cecil Snead said on Tuesday that he will be addressing faculty this week as opening day fast approaches.

"I will be at each of the nine schools this week to offer encouragement and reassurances about being the light for each student who walks into the classroom or who participates virtually. If we as adults are concerned, imagine being a child without the benefit of experience. Part of their learning and development is observing their environment around them. It's our modeling of behavior that can shape our youth. Whether virtually, or face-to-face in a modified classroom, we need the students and the students need us."

OCHS attendance secretary Lynn Hall said the hardest part of the current situation is "just not knowing" how the

virus will affect school operations, as well as life in general.

"We've never done this before," she said from behind a plastic window in her office.

Hall will be responsible for tracking the attendance of online students as well as those who opt to attend in person one day a week. It will make for lots of extra screen time, but Hall is doing the best she can to prepare for a year of "trial and errors" in which everyone will proceed "day by day—that's all we can do."

"A new learning curve"

In a classroom around the corner and down the hall from the OCHS lobby, teacher Mary Freeman was upbeat.

"It's a new learning curve. I think everybody is working well together to get [the planning] done. A lot of teachers are helping each other," said the economics and personal finance teacher.

As she spoke, a colleague poked her head in the door and said, "It's what we do!" Freeman echoed those words and added, "Teamwork!"

But she is realistic about the new demands placed on her and her colleagues.

"I can teach my course in the dark," figuratively speaking. "But putting it online and keeping students engaged in this virtual classroom is a challenge that we've all got to overcome," Freeman said.

Like other OCHS teachers, she can't stop thinking about the potential risks the virus poses to everyone who shows up in person.

"It's uncharted territory. I think our kids should be in school learning, but I'm worried about health concerns."

Asked if there is anything hopeful or fun about the new style of teaching and learning, Freeman had a ready response.

"The fun part will be students will have a new learning tool that they can take with them on to higher education," she said.

Knowing how to take classes online and expertly operate a laptop computer will serve them well: "It's a good thing for them to learn," Freeman continued.

As for the whole experiment that will begin on Monday, she showed the mettle that comes with her longtime dedication to teaching and a deep love for her students: "We've got to make it a positive experience. We don't have a choice."

Return concern

Teachers speak of frustration, exhaustion at school board meeting

BY HILARY HOLLADAY
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In a school division that prides itself on being a family, Monday's school board meeting revealed a family in crisis. Five teachers expressed extreme frustration with a ballooning workload they feel they can never escape, and Curtis Harris of Locust Grove, a father of four, told members of the school board they need to take responsibility and help teachers and students deal with the huge challenges of virtual learning during the pandemic.

Later in the meeting, Director of Secondary Instruction Renee Honaker and Director of Elementary



PHOTO BY HILARY HOLLADAY

Parent Curtis Harris addresses the Orange County School Board at its meeting Monday afternoon. Harris, the father of four, said that teachers don't deserve to bear the brunt of parents' frustration. "You guys should be getting yelled at," he told the board members. "Please, listen to the teachers in your district. We have to do better. Please, do better."

Education Judy Anderson introduced a group of teachers from Gordon-Barbour Elementary School and Orange County High School who demonstrated how Canvas, the online platform newly introduced this year, enables teachers to run virtual classrooms. Their presen-

tation—not without a few computer glitches—provided a sharp contrast to the remarks during public comment when teachers pleaded for help, their voices occasionally betraying their anguish.

"Crushed by workload"

John Lyon, president of the Orange County

Education Association and a special education teacher at Orange County High School, spoke first during the public comment portion of the meeting.

Lyon said members of the local chapter of the teachers' organization told him during a

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recent meeting that they “feel like they are being crushed by their workload,” which is requiring far more time than their contractually obligated eight hours per day.

“Frankly, there are a lot of people that are incredibly frustrated. I’ve had at least four people tell me that they have letters of resignation ready to go, ready to hand in at a moment’s notice when they reach that breaking point. That’s not good,” Lyon said, adding that some teachers have said they’re afraid to express their opinions publicly for fear of retribution.

He also said teachers are upset that they didn’t get the raises they had anticipated this year, and though no one faults the board for the pandemic-related drop in state revenue that took away those raises, he said low pay is “a big sore spot” for many. Further, teachers have told him they are disturbed that the board meets at 4 p.m., when many of them are still at work and unable to attend the meetings.

OCHS drama teacher Robert Kristel spoke next. He began and ended his remarks by expressing his love for the school district where he is in his seventh year of teaching but said he and his colleagues are barely hanging on.

“Right now I’m feeling concerned for my colleagues and myself as to what’s sustainable. I’m used to working long hours, but I’m coming in at 6:45 in the morning. I’m staying at school until six at night and going home, taking an hour break to have dinner with my wife, jumping back on the computer, starting to work until 11 o’clock at night. This is every day for the last three weeks.”

Kristel said he spent 12 hours on Sunday uploading videos on Canvas.

Addressing the somber-faced board members, he said, “I feel like I need to tell you guys that we’re at the breaking point, and we’re only three weeks into the year, and who knows what’s going

to happen in October and November, and February?”

Kristel said he thinks of teachers as public servants and believes Orange County teachers are doing a good job for the public. “But please remember we are people as well and we do have families. I have a son that’s going to be born any day now; I start my parental leave today. I’m exhausted. I’m getting stress headaches; I can’t sleep.”

He said he’s stayed in Orange County because he doesn’t “want to be a number” in some other district. “I love the family atmosphere here. I want to be a part of that family. Right now I’m not feeling the love back from the family.”

The other teachers who spoke during public comment were Heather Schmidt, Norm Schmidt and Caroline Carter-McClure, all of OCHS.

“Mentally and emotionally exhausting”

Career tech teacher Heather Schmidt said she and other teachers have been getting calls from angry parents, “actually screaming at us” out of frustration with the online learning setup. She said she realizes the parents are “having a really bad day,” but for teachers, attempting to do their work and address parents’ concerns, “It’s just exhausting, mentally and emotionally exhausting.”

She said the Orange County Schools have not clarified the attendance policy since May and that there are students who have not logged on to Canvas since August. She noted that OCHS students are searching for information on “the middle school page” because they can’t find the answers they need on the OCHS Canvas site.

English teacher Norm Schmidt read a letter from Patrice Day-Owens, a career tech teacher at the high school who was unable to attend the meeting. In her letter, Day-Owens said teachers “are not feeling part of the process” as the schools attempt to offer a complete education online.

Given the demands of their online teaching duties, which don’t easily accommodate time off, Day-Owens wrote that teachers feel they “can’t take sick time unless we are dying—literally.”

Speaking of his own frustrations, Norm Schmidt said parents and students didn’t receive adequate training in the use of Canvas, which replaces Google Classroom, the online platform the school division used in the spring during the early weeks of the pandemic.

Carter-McClure, a special education teacher, is a familiar face to school board members. The step-daughter of the late Judy Carter, a longtime board member, Carter-McClure told the board, “I feel like I’m under toxic stress.”

She said she is not “an alarmist” by nature, but the pressures of the pandemic combined with the increased workload have been overwhelming.

“You guys should be getting yelled at”

Curtis Harris offered a parent’s viewpoint. Speaking calmly, Harris nevertheless made his anger and exasperation very clear. He said he and his wife pulled their sixth-grader out of the local schools after the boy dissolved into tears of frustration when he couldn’t get Canvas to work properly.

Harris said that teachers don’t deserve to bear the brunt of parents’ frustration. “You guys should be getting yelled at,” he told the board members. “Please, listen to the teachers in your district. We have to do better. Please, do better.”

During the Canvas demonstration, several teachers voiced no complaints as they walked the board members through the technology teachers and students use every day.

Mustering smiles, OCHS teachers Laura Beth Chambers and Shelley Dean described how they work online with special needs children.

“We’re pretty much Zooming all day long with our students because they need the socialization,” Chambers said. She projected an image on the boardroom screen showing children in a virtual Zoom class. She added that she and her colleagues continue the Zoom meetings during the children’s lunchtime.

Although Chambers and Dean and the teachers from Gordon-Barbour appeared on top of their Canvas game, it was obvious they, too, are pushing themselves beyond normal expecta-

tions—and that they had to become full-time techies, whether they wanted to or not.

“Lean on each other for some support”

After the Canvas presentation, during the Q&A session with board members, Honaker told the board she understands the impact the pandemic has had on public education in Orange County: “I know this is hard on teachers and on families,” she said, her voice breaking. “We’ll get better.”

She acknowledged that Canvas “does have its quirks.” Speaking to the larger issue, Honaker added, “This is an unprecedented time, but we do support [teachers] and we want them to know this.”

Board chair and District 2 representative Sherrie Page said she felt “empathy for everyone sitting in this room. ... My heart breaks for everyone in here. I beg of you to lean on each other for some support.”

Page said that teachers need to realize that completing every lesson is not as important as “reaching that kid and making that connection.”

Superintendent of Schools Dr. Cecil Snead said he is aware that all the people involved in the school division’s pandemic learning experiment are “in different development stages.”

He said, “This is a very disciplined, strong-willed process that has no shortcuts,” he said of the school year in progress. “Along the way, it is painful.”

Given that the schools have “hit a situation that we can’t fix”—the logistical nightmare created by the pandemic—“we have to grow into it.”

One thing is clear: the Orange County School administration is trying mightily to cobble together a meaningful educational experience for the 4,740 students Snead said are enrolled this year, while frantic teachers, students and parents are losing sleep over every dropped Wi-Fi connection and every assignment that mysteriously vanishes into the ether.

Positive case at OCHS

A positive virus case is not helping matters in the least. Last week, Snead announced that a staff member had tested positive for COVID-19. A letter sent to OCHS staff and families revealed that the person in question worked at the high school: “Students who were in the same classroom as this individual or who are considered close contacts have been notified separately, as they may be at a higher risk.” The letter went on to note that school personnel were working closely with the Rappahannock-Rapidan Health District “to identify the steps that need to be taken to keep our students, staff and families safe and healthy.” There were no plans to put in-person classes on hold due to the positive case.

On Tuesday morning, Snead said via email, “The learning curve for everyone is quite extensive. Our solution addresses needs for those children who attend face-to-face and for those who select a 100% virtual solution. We all have had concerns about the sustainability of our work pace at some point in time throughout; however, what we have learned and witnessed at different stages in the process is that the intensity over a period of time becomes more manageable.

“For example, you witnessed a demonstration by teachers who created an exemplar in teaching at the high school level and elementary level. They demonstrated the Canvas platform and engagement activities. As I’ve visited elementary, middle and high school classrooms across the division, this expert level of use seems to be more of the norm.”

He noted that teachers and other staff members are eligible for emotional support from the school division’s insurance company and OC Cares, a new program making use of activities and a book called “Onward,” by Elena Aguilar.

“This, as with all other measures, continues to be developed as time progresses,” Snead said.

Schools offer free meals to all children

Beginning last Friday, Orange County Public Schools has been serving meals at no charge to all children 18 and under.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) has approved waivers for local school divisions and other federal meal program sponsors to implement the Summer Food Service Program to provide meals to children in the community free of charge through December. The waivers support access to nutritious meals while minimizing exposure to COVID-19, according to a press release issued last week by Linda Blair, Orange County Schools Supervisor of School Nutrition.

The new school year requires a new meal application. Although school meals will be provided free to all children, school funding depends on completed meal applications. A new meal application must be completed for those who have not already been notified that they qualify for free meals. Blair said it is important to submit a completed meal application as soon as possible and noted only one meal application is needed for each household. Applications are available online at www.lunchapplication.com.

Meals are available to all children including those learning in-person or virtually.

Drive up grab-and-go meals will be provided, on a first-come, first-served basis every Friday from 11:30 a.m. to 12:30 p.m. through Dec. 18 at Orange County High School, Gordon-Barbour Elementary School, Locust Grove Middle School and Unionville Elementary School.

Lunch and breakfast for five days will be provided at one time. Parents or guardians may visit any of these four locations to receive meals for children. There will be no curbside distribution on Friday, Nov. 27.

The current Monday through Thursday curbside school meal distribution has been discontinued.

For information regarding meal distribution, visit www.ocss-va.org.



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