

SHS grad remembered for wit, motivation, resilience

By Stephen Faleski
Staff Writer

Isle of Wight County is mourning the loss of 21-year-old Hannah Goetz, who four years ago underwent a rare double lung transplant weeks after graduating Smithfield High School.

She'd been diagnosed in 2012, at age 10, with cystic fibrosis, a genetic disease that results in frequent lung infections.

Mindy Poland, a longtime friend of Goetz's mother, Holly, traveled with the family in 2019 on a Caribbean summer cruise to celebrate Hannah's having earned enough high school credits to graduate a year early. But the then-17-year-old came down with flu-like symptoms shortly after returning home.

"That's when everything kind of changed," Poland recalls.

When the infection worsened rapidly, Hannah's doctors at the Children's Hospital of the King's Daughters in Norfolk hooked her to an extracorporeal membrane oxygenation, or ECMO, machine to oxygenate her blood and arranged that July for her to be transferred to Inova Fairfax Medical Campus in Annandale, but the persistent infection in her lungs kept her from being eligible for a transplant.

At Inova, Hannah's doctors stopped the infection by removing Hannah's lungs and tying off the connecting blood vessels – an operation that Poland says had at the time been performed only once before in the United States, and forced Hannah to the top of the transplant waiting list.

Four days after the operation, the hospital found a pair of compatible lungs to transplant into Hannah. The Smithfield Times reported in 2019, days after the live-saving operation, that when Hannah awoke from her induced coma, her first words to her mother were a whispered, "I love you."

This year, Hannah's condition again took a turn for the worse. She'd spent nearly the entire year – save for her 21st birthday and a Mother's Day outing with Holly – back in the hospital, where doctors diagnosed her with chronic rejection of her gifted lungs.

Her family and friends held out hope that she would be transferred to another hospital for a second transplant, but Hannah, on July 14, told her doctors and family "she was done," Poland said.

The tracheotomy port in Hannah's neck prevented her from speaking, but she was lucid and could write, Poland said. At 10:48 p.m. on July 14, hospital staff disconnected Hannah's oxygen and ventilator from her tracheotomy port and made her comfortable. Thirty-four hours later, at 8:17 a.m. on July 16, she passed.

Hannah had written letters to her parents in April on her cellphone.

"They found the password and read them Saturday," Poland said.

Poland, whom Holly named as Hannah's godmother when she was born in 2002, remembers her goddaughter as "spunky" and "opinionated," with "not a shy bone in her body."

During her first two years of high school at Windsor High, where her mother teaches, she starred in school plays and loved to sing, Poland recalls. Hannah also played soccer despite her medical condition, and even after the transplant, played on a sand soccer team as goalie.

She loved the beach and was constantly bringing rescued animals home, among them a cat she named "Big Mac."



Hannah Goetz's struggle with cystic fibrosis and as a transplant survivor reached people all over the world on CaringBridge.org. (Submitted photo)

"That cat has been her solace over the past couple of years," Poland said.

Hannah had aspired to attend college and in 2019 was accepted to Longwood University in Farmville, but her transplant that summer put those plans on hold. Most recently, she'd begun taking classes online and was hoping to become a respiratory therapist.

"That was hard for her," Poland said of the delayed college plans. "A lot of her friends did leave and go to college."

Matthew Ployd, who taught U.S. government to Hannah at Smithfield High School, remembers his former student as "witty," "brilliant" and "extremely resilient."

When Ployd invited human trafficking survivor Monica Charleston to one of his classes in 2018, his students began a years-long and ultimately successful effort to draft and lobby for legislation dubbed "Monica's Law," intended to protect trafficking victims. Hannah, who continued the effort in 2019,

"was a big, instrumental part of that," Ployd said.

She would speak to politicians who came to speak to the class and would

write letters to state lawmakers, Ployd recalls. Monica's Law, which provides victims of human trafficking an affirmative defense if charged with "prostitution" or residing in a "bawdy place," became law in Virginia on March 24, 2021.

"The more she learned about (human trafficking), the more she got motivated to want to make an impact," Ployd said, and she "would motivate other people to be as driven as she was."

In fact, anytime the class discussed anything political, she would come into class early and stay late to discuss it, Ployd recalls.

When Hannah underwent her 2019 transplant, Ployd and his wife drove 3½ hours to see her at Inova.

"To see the level of fight in that kid, she was determined, she was not going to give up," Ployd said. "It's that resiliency that I will always remember."

Hannah's struggle with cystic fibrosis and as a transplant survivor, Poland said, has reached people all over the world. On CaringBridge.org, a website that allows family members of critically ill people to share updates in a blog-like format, Hannah's page had reached nearly 300,000 views as of July 18, Poland said, and

had received a comment from someone in Australia.

Locally, the Isle of Wight County community has rallied behind Hannah during her time in high school.

In 2017, three Windsor Elementary classes teamed up to host a "Sixty-Five Roses" 5K at Windsor Castle Park in Smithfield, inspired by Hannah's story. The event's name was a nod to a common mispronunciation of the disease by children who have it.

"People have followed her

story for four years," Poland said.

Poland said the family is seeking donations to the Cystic Fibrosis Foundation in Hannah's memory, and encouraging others to sign up to be organ donors. The family is planning a celebration of life service within the next month, Poland said, likely in Portsmouth, where Hannah resided after high school. A private ceremony at the beach will follow in October.



Hannah was well enough to be released from the hospital to celebrate her 21st birthday in February. (Submitted photo)



Hannah would constantly bring animals home, among them a cat she named "Big Mac." (Submitted photo)