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ALERT TOP STORY

Friends, coaches remember Cassidy Richardson as an inspiration following her 10-year fight with cancer

Emily Brown

Aug 17, 2023



Cassidy Richardson, pictured at a swim-a-thon event in her honor in 2016, died Tuesday after battling cancer for a decade.

The News & Advance file

Emily Brown

“**S**he never quit fighting. Ever.”

This was Cassidy Richardson in a phrase.

Richardson, the Forest girl who inspired the area for a decade as she battled cancer, died Tuesday at the age of 19.

“We are heartbroken at the loss of our daughter. But we rejoice in knowing that she is completely healed and in God’s presence,” Cassidy’s mom, Kim, wrote in a social media post.

From her initial diagnosis — of osteogenic sarcoma — at 9 years old until Cassidy “passed peacefully,” Kim carried her daughter through countless tests and procedures at hospitals all over the East Coast, faithfully updating throngs of supporters along the way.

Surgeries involving her lungs and leg (one replacing bone and joint) and procedures piled up, as did therapy and treatments (immunotherapy, radiation and chemo among those targeting the cancer that attacked her body). Kim chronicled that journey of ups — including periods of remission — and downs.

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Negative, difficult side effects often battered Cassidy in the aftermath of those medical interventions, as her mom related to those who joined “Team Cassidy.”

But there wasn’t a chance you’d see Cassidy let the the tears and sickness occasionally mentioned in those posts keep her from the place she loved — the pool.

Cassidy — who graduated from Jefferson Forest High School, where she also was a member of the swim team for a period — had been a Hill City Dolphin, a member of the club’s summer swim team, since before she was diagnosed.

She swam alongside friends and mentors, her “spunky” attitude and wide smile brightening the days of those she encountered, according to Hank Reed, her longtime coach at the club. On any given morning or afternoon, he said, she’d pour 100% of herself into her training and competition.

Cassidy was “one of the best relay swimmers we’ve ever had” at Hill City, Reed said, because she “never wanted to let anybody else down.”

Reed recalled, too, another example of her determination.

One year, Cassidy was fully aware of her standing in the area ranks ahead of her meet at the end of the summer: she was slotted into the slowest heat for finals of the 100 freestyle, based on her time.

That the odds were stacked against her for that race didn’t matter.

She won it anyway.

“That was crazy,” Morgan White, another coach at the time, recalled Thursday.

That was the approach she took during her bout with cancer, even as it threatened to steal away the sport she loved.

Without knowing her story some other way, it’d be hard to tell cancer and all its effects were part of Cassidy’s reality.

“It was incredible to see her fight so hard, at such a young age, for so long and live her life to the fullest,” said Haley Jennings, another former coach.

Surgery on Cassidy’s leg limited her kick, making swimming difficult, but she still made it back in the pool from time to time.

“When she came back and got on that block, dove in for the first time after her knee surgery, you could just feel chill bumps and amazement [from everyone watching],” White recalled, then later commended Cassidy for her resolve in the face of such significant obstacles. “She never quit fighting. Ever.”

Treatments also lessened Cassidy’s endurance. But even when she wasn’t in the water, she was near it.

She fought for her teammates without hesitation, said Reed — and White, and Jennings and Megan Enneking, one of Cassidy’s “buddies,” or mentors, with the Dolphins. Whether on foot or on crutches, Cassidy was on the pool deck when she couldn’t step onto the starting block, screaming words of encouragement as teammates bobbed in and out of the water.

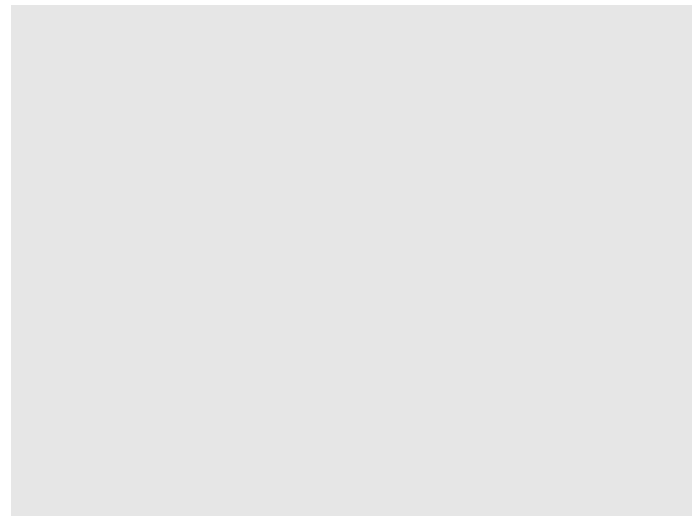
“She wanted to be part of this amazing swim community,” Enneking said. “She wanted to be there for them as much as they were for her.”

Upon hearing her diagnosis back in 2013, Cassidy’s swim club quickly hopped on to lend support. Three years into her battle, Hill City hosted the biggest of their events in honor of Cassidy. Their swim-a-thon featured kids and coaches swimming thousands of laps, collectively, to raise funds for her family’s medical expenses. (Cassidy, then 12, swam 35 laps that evening, on one of her nights away from the hospital, where she was undergoing immunotherapy to treat a second recurrence of cancer.)

Other area Lynchburg Aquatic League teams held their own fundraisers, including “Pink Out” meets (in honor of Cassidy’s favorite color). In 2020, area high schools jumped on board and hosted their own fundraiser, during which more than 250 swimmers “competed” in a meet.

“I think it’s really cool that everyone cares so much,” Richardson told The News & Advance during that event.

That meet served as the highlight of the season for Ellie Eckert, an E.C. Glass swimmer at the time. By the end of the year, Eckert had racked up Seminole District and Region 4D titles. But the night when she and her fellow swimmers worked to uplift Cassidy — a girl from a rival school — was her favorite memory, she said in a postseason interview.



Richardson

Cassidy's positive attitude then, as well as before and after her days as a JF student, remain an inspiration to those who knew her.

“Looking back, day in and day out, I wonder how she did it,” Reed said.

Enneking, who was several years older than Cassidy when they became “buddies” on the Hill City team, quickly formed a bond with Cassidy. They'd hang out at Cassidy's house playing games, make trips to Mister Goodies for ice cream and became Sharpie tattoo artists for each other during meets.

“The way she went about her day-to-day life, you'd never think she was going through as intense of a treatment as she went through,” Enneking said Thursday, remembering Cassidy as the girl with all the fortitude in the world, but who also enjoyed things any other young girl would. Thinking of Cassidy's trip to see Taylor Swift in concert — and meet her, thanks to a social media post from Enneking that made its way to Swift's team — brought back particularly fond memories, Enneking said.

Back then, when the two were kids, Enneking “didn't really understand” the disease that took hold inside Cassidy's bones and lungs, despite being several years older than her. But Enneking heard from her friend the stories of the hospital trips and of

“how special” the nurses were to her, and now points to Cassidy’s fight as having ripple effects well beyond her own community.

Enneking is now an oncology nurse. In the days since Cassidy’s death, Enneking has put into words the significance of Cassidy’s influence.

“Thank you for reminding me every day why I decided to go into this profession, and thank you for giving me the strength to care for other individuals with cancer. Your strong will and amazing attitude throughout your entire 10 years of battling this illness is why I do what I do,” Enneking said. “I now know you’ll be looking down on me, and helping to protect all of the other cancer fighters that I encounter day to day.”

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Funeral arrangements

A funeral service for Cassidy will be held at 2 p.m. Saturday at Hyland Heights Baptist Church. The family will receive friends from 6 p.m. to 8 p.m. Friday at the church. According to **Cassidy’s obituary**, the family requests that donations, in lieu of flowers, be made to Alex’s Lemonade Stand Foundation for Childhood Cancer.

By Emily Brown

ALERT TOP STORY

Once sidelined by eye issue, Carter embracing chance to provide again for Glass in senior season

Emily Brown

Oct 26, 2023

Emily Brown

Through nine weeks and eight games, E.C. Glass is not short of noteworthy moments. Offensive outbursts and big wins are part of the resume, but a moment in Week 5 stands out among the list of Hilltopper highlights.

Glass ran away with a victory over Amherst on that late September night, but coach Jamar Lovelace remembers one score with particular detail.

With the 'Toppers offense set up near midfield, the play call tapped Taveon Carter as ball-carrier. Then Carter, uninterested in just picking up a first down, found some space before creating more of a gulf between him and the nearest defender. Carter went 50-plus yards to the end zone.

"The whole sideline erupted for him," Lovelace recalled.

"It was such a good moment."

A good moment because Lovelace's squad earned six points and momentum. A better moment because of the guy who'd done most of the work for that advantage.

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Carter, in his first game of his senior season, put a tally in the touchdown column. Finally, after standing on the sideline for the first several contests, Carter could see his potential for a breakout campaign come into focus.

Taveon Carter was 6 years old when he got his first taste of the sport in which he now excels. Back then, youth leagues offered a chance to dip his toe in, to feel out exactly what football entailed.

“It was something I wanted to try out just to see if I would like it,” Carter said.

He was hooked early.

“I fell in love with it,” added Carter, who played running back as a child, too.

The years that followed included games at the youth level, paired with a growing admiration for some of the sport’s biggest stars. Bo Jackson and Ray Lewis, Carter said, were a couple of his favorite players, whom he hoped to one day imitate on the gridiron.

“It was the key to my happiness,” Carter said of the role football played during his adolescence.

Other free time was devoted to the sport, too, though a ball didn’t always have to be involved.

During his high school years, for example, Carter believed in his talent and made sure it didn’t go to waste. So he spent time watching film to grow his understanding of the running back spot, including how to find and hit gaps, and how to gain the advantage

against each level of the defense (his time spent playing middle linebacker and safety as a kid helped that endeavor, as well). Then there were personal workouts he did at E.C. Glass. There, he said, he ran hills in an effort to increase his speed.

“I love it,” he said when asked about whether that particular undertaking ever became arduous.

His commitment to conditioning extends indoors also, according to classmate and fellow running back Mike Thomas.

“Weight room for sure. Weight room,” Thomas said, explaining Carter’s work ethic serves to boost the dedication level of the entire team. “That boy is one of the hardest workers I’ve ever seen.”

Carter, who stands just 5-foot-6, said his stature has pushed him to focus on his strength, making him hard to bring down if he’s ever caught.

The reason for undertaking all those tasks, though, is simple.

“It’s a love type of thing,” he said.

Promise defined Carter’s offseason. All that work he put in on his own, he believed it would pay off in the form of a stellar senior year.

Under Lovelace, the new Glass coach, Carter could envision his number being called and could see himself delivering in big moments. Carter, after all, was one of the “guys who you trust with the ball in their hands,” Lovelace said.

Having played for a year in the backfield with Carter — who transferred after his sophomore year from Heritage, the city rival the Hilltoppers will take on in the Jug Bowl at 7 p.m. Friday — Thomas saw Carter’s ability, too.

“He gets it done,” Thomas said. “[We’re] like that 1-2 punch.”

But when the two and their teammates were set to measure their improvement as a squad during 7-on-7s in the summer, that belief turned quickly to uncertainty.

Before one of those sessions, Carter woke up with vision issues. His right eye wouldn't turn all the way to the right when he tried.

He sat out as a precautionary measure, personally convinced a bad night's sleep was to blame. The next day, however, the problem had intensified.

A trip to the ER, in an effort to correct the problem that not only limited his peripheral vision but also resulted in double vision, came next.

"I had to do so many tests," Carter said.

He was diagnosed with a nerve issue. Rest and time was the cure, he said.

Then came the gut punch. Doctors told Carter he'd have to sit out for six months. By then, his entire senior season would be over.

Carter was scared, he admitted. His team was disappointed, to say the least, Lovelace noted.

"It was tough to break the news to the team, especially a kid that means so much to the team and worked so hard over the offseason," the coach said.

For Carter, the situation emotionally devolved even further.

"I was very depressed," he said, "because I couldn't be out here with my team."

For the first four weeks of the regular season, Carter had to stand on the sideline, watching while the Hilltoppers went 3-1.

Meanwhile, he showed up to practice each day doing what he could, whether that meant encouraging and mentoring teammates or soaking up knowledge from the coaching staff from a different perspective.

“We were calling him Coach Carter while he was out for a while,” Lovelace said.

The senior’s hope had taken a hit, to be sure, but he wasn’t ready to say the season would be a total loss.

Eventually, after that layoff and a follow-up physical, Carter’s belief paid off.

“And then, Coach Carter got a chance to put the pads back on,” Lovelace said.

Carter was cleared to return for the Amherst game, delivering that hype-building touchdown run of 50-plus yards for Glass and then adding another. Half of his carries ended in scores. By the end of the night, he’d racked up 96 yards.

“It was nice,” Carter said. “Glad to know I still had it.”

Carter called the months-long ordeal one of the most difficult things he’s had to endure in life. Now, though, he’s “fully healed,” his vision back to what it was before the season got underway.

He’s actually pretty convinced his vision, when it comes to seeing the field and potential openings he can find to display his speed and strength, is even better than in years past.

That Amherst game served to solidify that thought in his head, and sent a message to opponents that Carter and the rest of the Glass offense are not to be taken lightly.

Heritage, Carter’s former school, certainly will not be caught off guard Friday, when the Pioneers will look to secure a sixth straight win (and 14th in the last 15 games) in the annual rivalry series. But Carter, in his last shot to hoist the little brown jug with Glass, also expects to show up for his team.

“Breakout game,” he said when asked what he anticipates for himself Friday. “One of my best.”

“One hundred yards?” he was asked.

“More than that,” he responded.

“Three touchdowns?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Carter’s track record suggests that confidence is warranted, but it’s likely that belief comes from more than just memories of past performances.

His conviction is perhaps also tied to the first few months of the season, when he watched and waited for his time to come.

“I think you can see it in his play. Every time he carries the ball, it means something to him,” Lovelace said, “and I think that’s a lesson for all of us.”

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By Emily Brown

https://newsadvance.com/sports/college/cooley-with-all-the-heart-after-overcoming-difficult-childhood-looks-to-lead-lu-to-fiesta/article_cdb386a2-a768-11ee-857e-0301e4e88c62.html

ALERT TOP STORY

Cooley, with 'all the heart' after overcoming difficult childhood, looks to lead LU to Fiesta Bowl win

Emily Brown

Dec 30, 2023



Liberty running back Quinton Cooley (20) celebrates after scoring one of his three touchdowns ahead of UTEP safety Andres Leighton, The Associated Press

Emily Brown

SCOTTSDALE, Ariz. — Quinton Cooley sat Saturday on a platform at the media headquarters for the upcoming game his Liberty football team will play. He was one of a few LU players who were perched a few feet off the ground, in front of posters

emblazoned with their names and images in a signal to the news outlets that bustled about the room that Cooley was one of the athletes who bears watching on New Year's Day.

A premier running back on his squad, Cooley enters the Flames' next outing — Monday's 1 p.m. EST Fiesta Bowl at State Farm Stadium — with plenty of optimism. He's on the cusp of individual history with his program, which itself already has risen to never-before-seen heights. And for both himself and his teammates, the ones he joined as a member of the Flames only this year after transferring from Wake Forest, Cooley believes more record-breaking moments await.

“Being in the Fiesta Bowl and just seeing my family be able to see me grow each and every day is really a blessing,” Cooley said.

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With each passing game this season, Quinton Cooley's prowess out of the backfield has become that much more evident. He's posted no shortage of highlight-reel plays, and has been the player the Flames trust when they need 4 or 5 tough yards or a bruising run that can get them into the end zone.

Cooley, a North Carolina native, has been thriving at his new home.

This Quinton Cooley isn't the Quinton his siblings once knew. Because the confidence and other affirmation football has provided was nowhere to be found during much of Cooley's childhood.

Cooley and siblings grew up in an abusive household. Anger and frustration came down on them in the form of mental and physical abuse from their mother and her significant other at the time.

For a young Cooley, the weight of it all was almost too much to handle.

"My mindset, it was really weak. I feel like I was to the point where I wasn't needed in this world," Cooley said. "Sometimes I just felt like I didn't have the love that I needed. If I didn't get the love and somebody wouldn't take care of me, why be here?"

But his aunt, Taquisha Walker — who took in Cooley and his siblings — and football, helped bring him out of that dark state.

"My aunt taking [us in] and being there for me each and every day has really been a blessing," Cooley said.

The woman who was there when Cooley was at his worst — who still today encourages Cooley to "just keep going and going and going, don't give up" — also will have the chance to see him at a peak, in a New Year's Six bowl (the first ever for LU) at an NFL stadium.

During Cooley's youth and into his young adulthood, football, the sport he's come to love and excel at, has provided much of what was missing years ago.

"Football has really just created that space for me to love myself and have people around me. I wasn't surrounded with much love," Cooley said, "and now I have teammates and a lot of people around me surrounding me with love."

Among that group is Brendan Schlittler, a Liberty senior offensive lineman who's seen Cooley's production and ability in games and practices.

"He's an offensive lineman's dream to block for," Schlittler said. "He fights for the dirty yards. He makes a 1- or 2-yard gain a 4- or 5-yard gain. When you need 10 yards to get a first down, having someone like him is a dream.

"He brings that great energy, and I think the way he runs just provides a natural spark. I don't think anyone would want to stand up and say they want to tackle him in open space."

Cooley is the driving force behind Liberty's nation-leading rushing attack. The Flames average 302.9 yards per game, with Cooley averaging 101.7 of those.

The 5-foot-7, 210-pound back been described as a bowling ball, running over opponents in his path and tough to stop once he gets rolling.

Gains in the offseason and practices at his current stop have been to thank, but his mental approach — the one shaped by the obstacles he saw and overcame growing up — is a factor, too.

"He's got a drive and determination because of the challenging times he's faced," said Liberty coach Jamey Chadwell, who, like Cooley, also joined the program this year.

In Chadwell, Cooley said he saw someone who would care for him, and not just about what he could do on the field.

Chadwell asked Cooley about his commitment to his academics — an example, Cooley said, of the new coach's commitment to his players' well-being as people.

And during his search for a new school home following his decision to transfer from Wake, Cooley found in the people that make up Liberty the atmosphere he'd craved.

“There’s just people that want to help you with your life [at Liberty]. That’s all I wanted in my life. Just help me with my life,” Cooley said, referring again to his difficult past. “People help you with that, bring you closer to God, and it brings all that peace to you.”

On Monday, Cooley has a chance to help return to the university community some of what he’s been given.

He can power LU (which currently sits at 13-0 and is ranked in the College Football Playoff Rankings for the first time ever, at No. 23) to its first undefeated football season. National powerhouse and eighth-ranked Oregon (11-2), with one of the nations’ top run defenses, lurks.

But so do chances for more personal accolades — which would cap a season that’s given him a chance to prove that “I can ball ... [no] matter what conference I’m in,” Cooley said, referencing his move from an ACC school to the one that captured the Conference USA title early this month.

Cooley, who sits at 1,322 rushing yards on the year, is 26 yards shy of taking over second place in the program record book for rushing yards in a single season (179 shy of breaking Rashad Jennings’ 2008 record). With 16 touchdowns, he’s also one score short of matching Jennings’ 2008 mark for single-season rushing TDs.

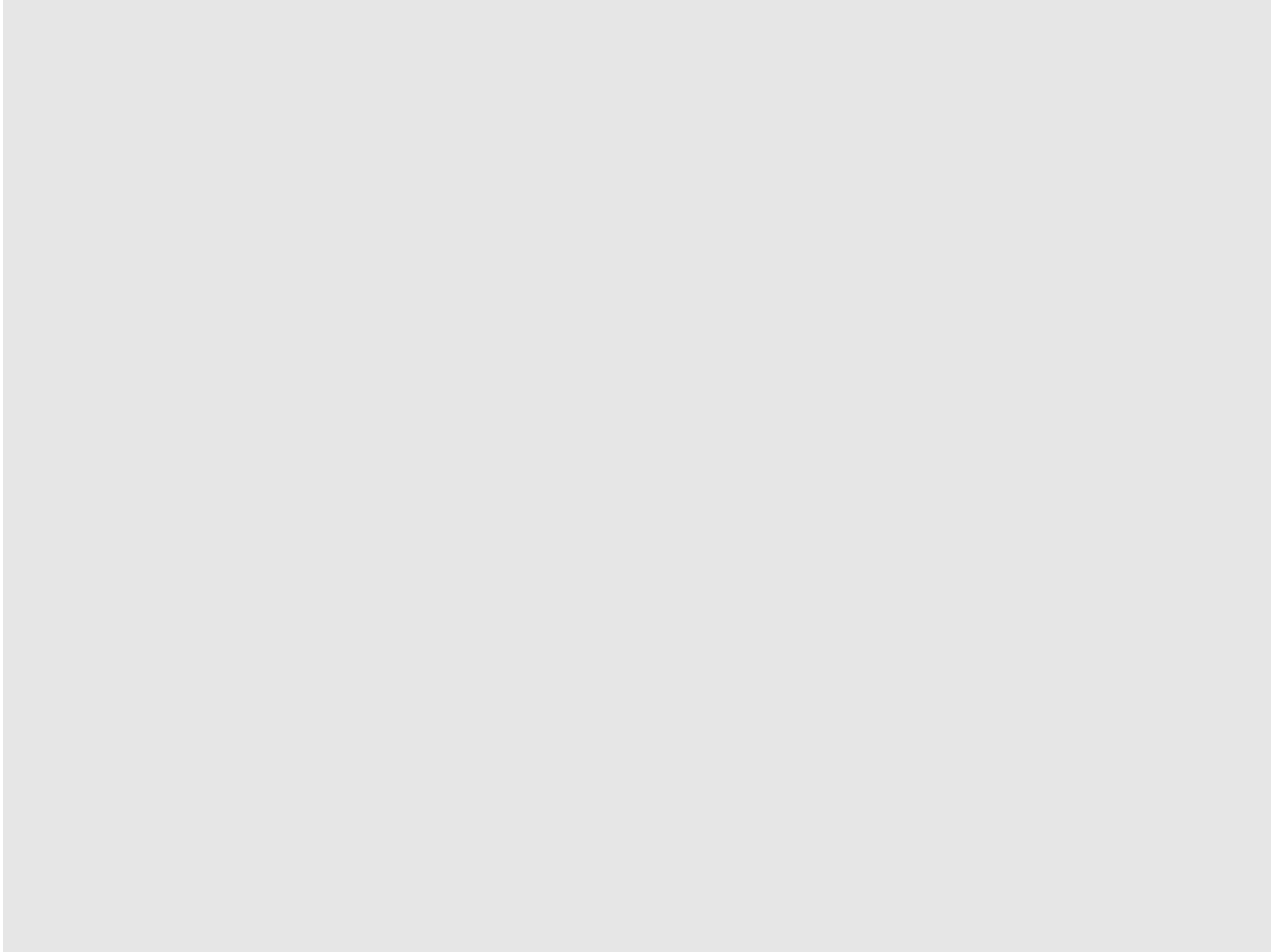
“I know it’s gonna be a hard task,” Cooley said, “but I’m looking for that hard task.”

He also knows he might not look like the person who can accomplish that goal, especially when he’s lining up across from some of the nation’s elite defenders Oregon boasts.

But he hasn’t let the challenges he’s faced thus far in life stand in his way yet. And he doesn’t intend to in the future.

“I’ll probably be the smallest person out there on the field when it comes to playing [this] game. But ... I got all the heart,” Cooley said. “I’ve been having all the heart my whole life, so I’m not gonna let nobody take that away from me.”

PHOTOS: Saturday's Fiesta Bowl-related activities in Arizona



Liberty quarterback Kaidon Salter takes a picture with a fan during a pep rally at the Scottsdale Plaza Resort in Arizona on Saturday.

Paige Dinger, The News & Advance
