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Crash stole student's life, but he'll always be a star

Colonie Central High School actors cope with friend's death by going on with planned musical

By ANNE MILLER

Staff Writer

COLONIE - On a grainy video posted online, Corey Womack, seated center stage, comes alive.

He is stocky and tall and his overgrown brown curls flop about his face. He is playing the carnivorous plant, Audrey II, in the Colonie Central High production of "Little Shop of Horrors."

The camera pans to the romantic leads but even in the background, Corey commands attention.

He sings, his voice a surprisingly clear baritone. Weeks later, the teacher-director will say high schools sometimes hire adults to sing this part. Finding a boy to sing that deeply is hard.

On camera, Corey smiles at the girls in the chorus. He jokes with the boys who lie at his feet, playing the plant roots.

The musical rests on Corey's broad, jovial shoulders. Corey's friends are used to that. He centers their world.

But that all changed a few minutes after midnight on Feb. 19, the day after Corey Womack's 18th birthday.

It was the start of winter break. Corey and friend Ryan Blake, 18, were headed home after playing video games with friends. The night was clear and cold. The wind gusted as they drove along New Shaker Road.

Corey rode shotgun. They were seconds from Corey's house on Lisha Kill Road.

Both wore seat belts and neither had been drinking, police said, when the car swerved off the pavement near Veeder Drive and struck a utility pole. Ryan had minor injuries.

Corey died instantly.

Now, his classmates say, they've lost their bearings. It seems like nothing this senior spring has gone as planned.

At a time in their lives when many kids search for identity, they revered Corey's fearless sense of self.

"He was a star for everyone to follow," says Angel Golden, 16, his musical co-star two years running. "Even if you didn't know him, you knew who he was."

"It's like that expression," adds Alexander Benson, 15, a sophomore cast member. "Sing like no one is listening, and dance like no is watching. That was Corey."

The last day of winter break brought Corey's funeral.

The cast had a month until the show opened.

About a week before curtain time, cast members sit on the floor in a Colonie High hallway outside the auditorium, their backs against the lockers.

Even in death, Corey makes them laugh. That purple, gray and black diamond sweater he wore everywhere. His homemade Nintendo game belt. His Stalin costume.

At a talent show, he draped himself in his mother's purple bedsheet and sang James Brown's "I Feel Good."

Only Corey could pull that off.

"He had this briefcase and aviators with the lenses popped out," says Anthony Souza, 19, who graduated last year.

"He would have whole conversations with himself in different accents," adds senior Jessica Steve, 17, a petite, clean-cut brunette in jeans and a T-shirt.

As the conversation continues, her eyes well up. She sniffles a little, gathers herself and re-enters the conversation. She and Corey dated for about six months in 10th grade.

"He did a very good Spanish accent," says Anthony.

"New Yawkers," adds Alexander.

"He could do Australia, like - whoa," Jessica says.

"I think one of the most tragic things," says senior Brianna Garcia, 17, "is the people who won't be able to meet him."

When Corey was in kindergarten, his father moved to Denver. He was raised by his mother, Joy Dutton, in California, and then in Colonie since Corey was 12. She lives on Lisha Kill Road.

"We were a duet too," she says, her red hair falling across her face. She clenches and unclenches her hands, her knuckles sometimes white. "He was really nonjudgmental. He expected that back and if you couldn't give that back, that's your problem."

Corey planned to start Purchase College in January for new media studies, she says. His best friend, John Twardowski, would go with him.

Today, her son's ashes fill an etched bronze urn beside his framed senior portrait.

This is how the mother and the best friend mourn. John visits her and shares stories of Corey. John makes her laugh since Corey can't.

"Corey's friends have been amazing, really amazing," Joy says.

The chorus teacher "discovered" Corey in 10th grade.

During lunch period, Corey and Jessica asked the teacher if they could use the bathroom.

"Ask me again," Jessica recalls the teacher saying.

He did - in his baritone.

Right then, the teacher demanded he join the chorus. Corey's tryout for this year's musical was almost as easy.

"He opened his mouth," says teacher and director Michael Mensching. "He stylized it really well. His voice, tone and inflection, and stuff. He kind of had a Louisiana flare."

His death rocked the cast, his friends struggling with their emotions.

"I was really, really, really, really angry," says Anthony. "I was beyond angry. Because it always seems to happen to the most amazing people. It's not fair."

"I had a lot of school work to do, but I didn't do any of it," says Alexander, who learned the news from a friend's instant message. "I just sat on the couch and stared at the wall."

Jessica sees his ghost when she looks for him in the halls between classes. "I keep expecting an e-mail to pop into my inbox."

No one can replace Corey - but no one wanted to stop the play. It would help them heal.

"We all have each other here," says Audrey Saccone, 16, a junior who taped musical practices and posted the video on YouTube.com.

How to proceed was a harder question.

"It's too much pressure to put on one person," Mensching says. He tapped three cast members, including Alexander, to share the part.

But they refuse to take credit.

Tonight, the audience will see Corey Womack's name in the program. And if they look for it, they'll notice, on the shop awning in "Little Shop of Horrors," the purple, gray and black diamonds of Corey's favorite sweater.

For the finale, a slide show will illuminate stage right. The usual slides of Audrey IIs around the world will flash. And then a tribute to the missing star.

"Normally you wouldn't end the show on a downer," Mensching said. "Normally you'd have the lovers kissing."

And, normally, the senior star would be there to take his bow, accept flowers and embrace his friends.

Instead, they'll have only a picture.

Factbox:

Online tributes

Corey Womack's classmates have posted tributes to him online. Will Lentlie continues compiling messages from Corey's family, friends and teachers into a blog, <http://www.ripcorey.blogspot.com>.

Audrey Saccone has posted a video tribute to Corey, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2Aau11otnPY>. That video, plus rehearsal footage that includes Corey, can be found under her YouTube.com user name, *sosiimple*.

Show goes on

What: The Colonie Central High School production of the "Little Shop of Horrors"

When: 7 p.m. tonight, Friday and Saturday; 2 p.m. Saturday

Where: High school auditorium

Cost: \$5 per person, tickets available at the door