

Senior's family comes together after mother's sudden death



Nan and Glen sit on the floor in front of their decorated Christmas tree along with their children. In their family, Christmas is always a big deal.

STORY SANIKA SULE

The warm August sun beat down against the windows as senior Caleb Smoot rode with his sister and dad to Panama City Beach. They were once again returning to visit the Florida beach that they were so familiar with. As Caleb looked out he knew they would be revisiting the same sun, the same sand and the same water. But for the Smoots, nothing was the same.

Caleb drew a card from a stack of Table Topics to fill in the hours during the long car ride. As he answered the prompt on the conversation stimulating card, he did not talk about himself. Instead, he thought about what his mom, Nan Smoot, would say, like who her favorite school teacher was. As the family moved through the deck, they answered through her perspective to recall the little things that made Nan the person she was. Still healing from the events earlier this summer, Caleb and his family used this opportunity to come to terms with the loss of

MHSMARQUEE.COM

his mother.

"It was, I guess not final closure," Caleb said. "But it was really nice to go and remember her that way."

On June 16, just over a week after the last day of school, Nan passed away. Because the summer passed in a whirlwind, the family decided to return to Panama City Beach, one of Nan's favorite destinations. They recreated their past vacations, making it a point to do all of the things that Nan enjoyed doing.

"My mom was always really attached to the beach," Lexie said. "She liked the calming soothing sound of the ocean, and the way the sand felt on her feet. Since she always worked a lot it was kind of relaxing for her."

The family returned to her favorite restaurant and shopped at all the stores she loved in the nearby shopping center. During their last visit, Nan had heard about a bakery that she was eager to try, but would never have the opportunity to go to, so they made it a priority to visit it. Caleb's younger sister, Lexie, an eighth grader at Lamar, said that everything they did in remembrance of her mother helped her gain an increased appreciation for the life that Nan lived.

...

As Lexie raced down the soccer field, she was able to distinguish her mother's voice from the cheers of the entire crowd. Determined to help her daughter the best player she could be, Nan shouted words of encouragement and advised her on how to play the game. Lexie said that even though her mom wasn't well versed in the rules, her cheers proved to her how much her mom cared.

"She was probably my number one fan," Lexie said. "She didn't even know the sport very well, but she was still trying to help me become better at it."

Even beyond Lexie and Caleb's activities, Nan was known to be an advocate for others. She would write checks to those who needed it and help foster other people's careers.

"She was very generous in giving her time and money to people who really needed it," Caleb said. "She saw needs in our community, and if we could do something to help that person out, we'd do it."

As the school year was winding down and Caleb was preparing to leave for Boys State, he was stunned to hear that his mom had suffered a colon blockage. Though the news was initially shocking, the family soon realized that the blockage was easily treatable, and nothing to worry about.

"We actually thought that even if it was some kind of severe blockage, surgery takes care of that," Caleb's father, Glen said. "[It's] not a big deal, we had been through that more than once."

When the medicine was not effective, Nan was admitted to hospital, yet doctors still did not perform a surgery. Her initial admission was a sign of hope to the family.

"Getting into the hospital meant at least we're going to

move along here, something's going to take place, something going to change to make this better," Glen said. "That's anyone's expectation going into the hospital. [But] nothing was being done to actually fix the problem."

On a Tuesday at 4:00 a.m., Caleb was startled when he received a call from his dad. Glen explained that one of their closest friends would be coming to pick him and Lexie up from their house because their mom had gone into surgery due to further complications. Though the news worried Caleb, he was sure that his mom would pull through because he had seen her health improve throughout the week.

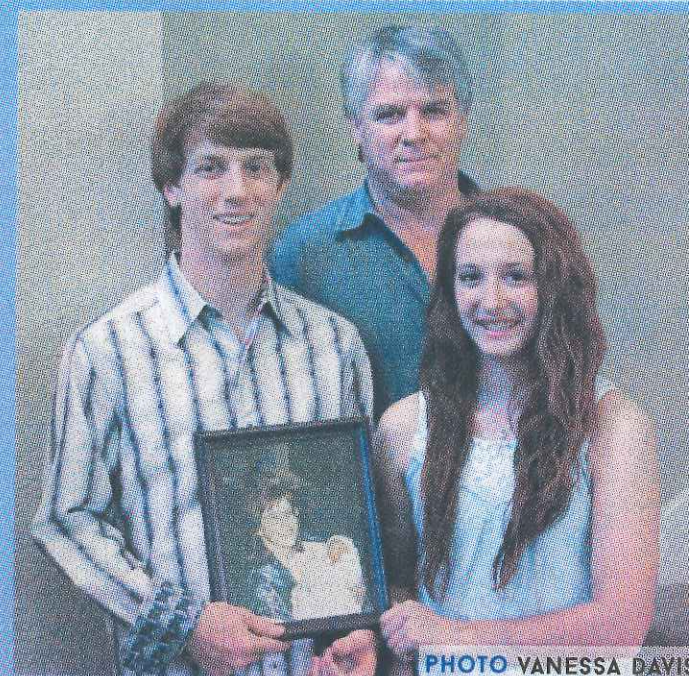
When he arrived at the hospital, Caleb soon realized that Nan was in a much more serious condition than he had previously believed. The pressure in her stomach area pushed back on her heart, causing her aorta to split. After hearing this, Caleb immediately took to social media to ask his friends and family to pray for his mother.

"I absolutely relied on God throughout all of that and I still do today," Caleb said.

Caleb and his family still had faith that if Nan made it into surgery it would be successful. When a surgeon approached the family, they thought nothing of it. The surgeon then delivered the news that Nan hadn't made it. Lexie said that she initially thought that the surgeon was making a joke. Only when he repeated it, did the family realize that Nan had passed away. After absorbing this reality, Lexie reached for the comfort of the multitude of friends and family that had gathered to support them.

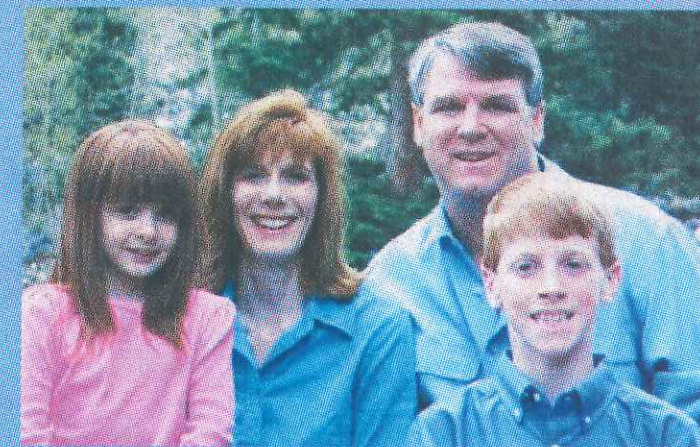
"My uncle was there from my dad's side, and I ran into his arms and I wouldn't let go," Lexie said. "I cried and screamed, but after that, after a few minutes of crying, I decided that I needed to be strong for my dad and brother, and I didn't break down after that."

The many people that Nan had touched throughout her life



The Smoot family holds an old photograph of their late wife and mother, Nan Smoot. Not a day goes by where they don't miss their mom.

DESIGN TARYN WELCH & MADELINE STANFIELD



Lexie, Nan, Glen and Caleb Smoot visit Colorado for their yearly summer vacation. They enjoyed spending time together outdoors.

were also there for her family. Caleb found support among his shooting team members, the team that Nan regularly supported. The week that she passed was the same week that Caleb had his state shoot. Knowing how important the team was to Nan, the shooting team decided to dedicate the weekend to her.

One member of the team even bought small pink ribbons which the entire team wore in support of her. Though the wound from the loss of his mother was still fresh, the comfort that he had received from his team led him to bring his team to second place. Caleb said he was astounded by the amount of support the team gave him, and was deeply touched by their actions.

"The shooting team was specifically amazing," Caleb said. "That meant a lot to me because it was like my family."

...

As Caleb pulls out his phone, he scrolls to a saved voicemail recording. He hears his mom's voice play through the speakers, reassuring him that everything would be okay. As she tells him that he does not need to return to the hospital, he is reminded of how she maintained her strength until the end. Though this is the last thing Nan said to him, Caleb continues to hear his mom's words of guidance.

As time passed, the family has come to terms with the loss of Nan. Glen has had to take charge of things that Nan normally did such as paying bills and keeping schedules, forcing him to reorient his time and energy. Though Nan's passing was a major loss to their family, Glen said that the only way to move on was to continue to operate as a family.

"Because the family was strong to begin with, we just kept being a family," Glen said. "We were already doing everything we needed to to, we cared for each other, we loved each other, we looked out for each other."

Caleb said that though he struggles with it from time to time, he has his friends, family and faith to rely on. He thinks back to times like his days spent at Panama City Beach with his mother, and remembers her kindness and all the values she passed on to him. Though he occasionally feels the pain of his loss, Caleb knows that Nan is still with him.

"People always say I'm so sorry for your loss, but I didn't lose her," Caleb said. "I know exactly where she is, and I talk to her almost every day."

DEC. 11, 2015