

CALEB WILLIS (final version)

By: Kathryn Tannahill

“Hi mom!” senior Caleb Willis shouted with a huge smile as he strode through his front door after school one October day. He gave his mom, Jennifer Willis, a huge hug and kiss, dropped his backpack in the living room, ripped off his shoes and socks and tossed them in a corner, and then carefully took off his letter jacket and hung it gently on the back of a chair.

“He wears it every day,” Jennifer said, referring to his letter jacket. “He would wear it in the summer if we let him.”

Caleb was born with Down syndrome, a condition that includes cognitive and physical disabilities as well as heart problems. So even though Caleb had been defying expectations all his life, receiving a varsity letter for a letterman’s jacket was something that most never expected he would get.

That changed though when paraprofessional Ben Wright agreed to work with Caleb after school as a male mentor. Wright took Caleb to work out in the weight room and to football, basketball, and wrestling practices. Caleb helped with water and towels, tossed balls back to players, gave hugs to injured players on the sidelines, and cheered on the team as they ran laps.

“It doesn’t matter if you go and screw up,” basketball coach Brendan Hair said. “He’s always there to give you a hug or a high five or say ‘good job’. He doesn’t get mad at the guys like I do, so being that positive, even keel I think helps the guys.”

Because of the enthusiastic, encouraging tone he brought to practice and his consistent involvement, Hair decided to award Caleb with a varsity athletic letter as a basketball team manager at the basketball banquet of Caleb’s sophomore year, and it was a significant moment both for Caleb and those who knew him.

“That’s when I realized that what I was doing, it’s not just a job,” Wright said. “I was able to help Caleb get something that most people thought he would never get a chance to get.”

Hair said it was a special and emotional opportunity for him to be able to present Caleb’s letter because of how genuinely supportive Caleb was of the team and because of how excited Caleb was to be at the banquet, regardless of the season’s record.

“To see him have that excitement for it, it just puts things in perspective. It tells you what’s important in life, and people are the most important things in life,” Hair said. “Basketball is important, but it’s important in the way it teaches us about life, it teaches us about ourselves, and Caleb that night was able to teach us a lot about how exciting it is to just be part of something and how important that is.”

Wright said that knowing Caleb impacted his life also.

“You can’t help but be happy and excited around that kid, he just oozes enthusiasm, so I think it spills out on everybody who’s around him,” Wright said. “It’s given me a different outlook and appreciation on life because I see how happy he is, and regardless of whether he understands the fact that he has Down syndrome, it never affects him... It’s like ‘If he can, then why can’t I? If he can be happy with his life, then what do I really have to complain about?’”

Jennifer said that it was a privilege for her to see how Caleb touched so many peoples’ lives. “I know they say obviously it’s a genetic malfunction,” Jennifer said, “but you know you just can’t believe for a second that Caleb was not meant to be who Caleb is, and Down syndrome is part of it. He has rocked that extra chromosome!”