

Story #1

A Sunflower High School baseball player was severely injured over the weekend after he was struck in the head by a pitch during an evening practice with his baseball team.

Catcher Jeremy Pfeifer, 16, had removed his face mask briefly, but the pitcher, friend and teammate Derek White, didn't see it in time and threw a pitch. The ball hit Pfeifer near his right temple.

Pfeifer was taken by ambulance to Clinton Hospital, then life flighted to a Wichita hospital, where he had surgery to help relieve pressure on his brain, followed by 36 hours in intensive care.

Pfeifer is in stable condition and is expected to recover, but it will take time. "I can't tell you how much it means to his mother and me the quick thinking by the coaches and teammates after Jeremy was hit," said his dad, Dick Pfeifer. "The ambulance was at the scene within minutes and did everything right. In all likelihood, the quick action by all involved saved Jeremy's life and we are forever grateful," he said.

Pitcher Derek White has struggled with what happened. "Jeremy is one of my closest friends, and to know that it was my pitch that hurt him just breaks my heart," White said. "I visited him in the hospital yesterday. He's looking pretty rough, but he was the same old Jeremy and I'm so glad about that."

It is unknown when Pfeifer will return to school.

Story #2

Daniel Nevin, a Sunflower High School senior, has won second place in the annual Siemens Competition in Math, Science and Technology.

Nevin's prize is a \$50,000 scholarship.

The Siemens Competition is administered by the College Board. The 12th annual awards were presented Monday morning at The George Washington University, which hosted the national finals this past weekend.

"This will really help out my family," Nevin said. "My father has been out of work since he was laid off more than a year ago."

Just last year, Jiang Ruoyi, also a senior, was named the individual winner in the 2012 Siemens Competition and won a \$100,000 scholarship for his research on chemotherapy drug resistance.

Nevin's research was titled "Novel Asymmetrical Bow-Tie PAMAM Dendrimer Conjugates as Model Systems for Anticancer Taxoid Drug Delivery-Chemistry." His goal is to develop a new method for anti-cancer drug delivery, leading to more effective, specific and biocompatible chemotherapeutic treatments for cancer patients," according to a Siemens press release.

Nevin's mentor is Dr. Ojima Owao, a distinguished professor of chemistry and the director of the Institute of Chemical Biology & Drug Discovery at Kansas State University.

"Daniel is intensely passionate about his research even at this early stage in his career," said Owao. "This boy is going to change people's lives," he said. "Mark my words."

Story #3

Talented players, good coaching and administrative support are the main ingredients behind a winning high school football program, a survey of Kansas' head football coaches showed.

More than 90 percent of the 147 coaches who responded to a questionnaire compiled by the Sunflower News listed one of those three components as the most important asset to winning.

Much less significant — and cited by fewer than 10 percent as the most important — were facilities, money, community and parental support, feeder programs and enrollment size. Only 12 of the 147 coaches listed any of those factors.

The most valuable ingredient was not easy to decipher: It depended on who was asked, and how the coach was asked.

“Depends on how truthful we want to be, but I think we’re only as good as our players,” said John Brown’s Ironside High, whose team upset reigning Class 5A champion Eisenhower County in the second round of the playoffs this year. “We can kid ourselves and pretend, but if our kids are not as good as the other guy’s, we’re going to struggle.”

Garnett High School Chip Chung agreed with that assessment.

“Players on the field can make up for me busting a call or checking to the wrong defense,” said Chung, won its first state title in 2011.

State Line’s Steve Rupp, however, was among 32 percent who said coaching was the most important asset. Rupp’s teams are 73-16 in seven seasons, though only seven of his former players are on college rosters today.

“The players, the students, the children, they’re all the same,” Rupp said. “What makes the difference are those who work with those children.”

He believes the continuity of a quality staff — and his seven coaches have been together for seven seasons — has made a bigger difference.

“We don’t have world-beater athletes down here like some of the people we’re playing, but if you’ve still got a foundation that’s consistent, it gives you a chance,” Rupp said. Twenty-three percent of the coaches said they would rather have the support of their principal and administration over anything else.

“With that, you can take care of the rest,” St. Pius X coach Pablo Sandoval said. “Without it, it is almost impossible to run a program.”

Answers shifted somewhat depending on how they were asked. More than 70 percent of the coaches said a good staff was mandatory and a program “can’t win unless this area is strong.” Thirty-eight percent of the coaches believed athleticism and talent were mandatory to winning. Just 23 percent of the coaches cited administrative support as mandatory.

The ready explanation for ranking talent behind coaching was this: While coaches were more likely to rate a staff as more important when using a 1-5 scale, they picked talent when forced to choose between assets they initially rated equally using the scale.

For example, 26 percent of the coaches listed both staff and talent as “mandatory” to winning on the 1-5 scale. When asked which was the most important asset overall, they were six times more likely to list talent over the coaching staff.

When coaches were asked which ingredient was most lacking at their school, there was no consensus.

Tops on the wish list was better facilities, cited by 17 percent of the coaches. More athleticism and talent (15 percent) came next.

Community/parental support (14 percent) and financial support (13 percent), which go hand in hand, accounted for 27 percent of the responses. Sandy Creek’s Walker said all ingredients were important for a successful program.

“To win at the highest level, you’ve got to have it all,” Walker said. “Look at the big names: Camden County, Northside, Buford. There are places like that in every class now that have it, so if you don’t you may not be able to accomplish that goal. That’s just how competitive it is in Kansas.”

Story #4

I have considered suicide. Yes, I have considered taking my own life. Unlike six other boys recently in the news, I never took the steps to follow through on my dark thoughts, but, unfortunately, I can understand what drove them. Because I know what it's like to be a gay teenager.

Imagine going through adolescence: hormones raging, body changing, and relationships that go a little deeper than friendship developing. Now, add on being gay.

Don't believe being different is difficult? Try going through a day in the life of a gay teen.

Every day you hear someone use your sexuality — a part of you that, no matter how desperately you try, you cannot change — as a negative adjective. That hurts.

You fear looking the wrong way in the locker room and offending someone. Politicians are allowed to debate your right to marry the person you love or your right to be protected from hate crimes under the law. Your faith preaches your exclusion — or damnation. And no one does anything to stop it.

Recently, the Archbishop used money donated by an anonymous source to denounce same-sex marriage. That's right: a major religious leader used non-Church money from a questionable source to publicly condemn your right to express your love in a public and binding manner.

A public school district nearby — after a wake of suicides by kids much like yourself — cannot bring itself to put your protection from bullying into its policies. Members of the district fear your kind and how you might brainwash their children into thinking that your behavior is appropriate or to join your kind.

A political party makes its position denying your right to marry one of its main voting points. And your nation voted this party in office.

You cannot legally give blood to save a life, nor risk your life to defend your country unless you hide your identity and deny who you are.

Oh yeah, and the words “queer,” “homo,” and “faggot” that people throw around all the time? Yeah, those might as well be personal attacks.

This is daily life for me. And I can understand why, if you are gay like me, you might consider ending it all. But I hope you don't.

Why? Because without you, who is going to make it better for everyone else? Without you, no one is going to stand up against the injustice. I need you to help me make this world a better place for both of us and everyone else like us.

And all of you who don't have to undergo this horror daily, it's up to you to help. Don't stand by and let hatred go on. Don't sit back and watch your friends be discriminated against. Reach out and help those who might need it.

Together, maybe we can make the world an easier place to live for gay and straight teens alike. Because no one else is going to do it for us.

Story #5

In the grand scheme of prayer requests, theirs seemed fairly simple.

Don and Marlene Dunbar were asking for friends at their church to pray for the youngest of their three daughters, the one who was born with Down syndrome. Not that they wanted God to change anything about

her. To the contrary, they were hoping, praying, to change those around her. Specifically to change her classmates at Sunflower High School. Not all 800 of them. Just one.

God, they asked, send a friend to Connie. One friend. Someone to sit with her at lunch. At the time, Connie Dunbar was 14 years old, a Sunflower High School freshman. And if you had wandered into the school and, just at a glance, tried to pick who was least likely to be named homecoming queen, you might have pointed at the girl who was eating by herself.

“As a parent, that pulls at your heart,” Marlene Dunbar said of picturing her daughter sitting alone. So every Tuesday, she went to school and ate lunch with Connie. And on Sundays, they prayed that someone else would join her.

They never imagined that four years later Connie would be standing on a football field, wearing a purple dress that she and her mother picked out for homecoming. The court already had been narrowed from more than 80 nominees to 10 boys and 10 girls. One by one, the runners-up were announced. Then the king. Jesse Huge fits the traditional mold of a homecoming king. Star basketball player, 4.2 grade point average, good-looking, popular. He was the nominee of the senior class.

But the queen ...

Several television stations were there that night, so you may have seen video of the moment. The queen leaping up and down, her grin making the king’s grin grow even bigger. Everyone in the stands on their feet. Parents dabbing their eyes. And not just Connie’s parents.

The king said his mom was crying. “And not for me,” he said with a laugh. So beyond prayer, how did this happen?

How did Sunflower High School become the scene of a story that feels almost too good to be true, like something straight out of a movie script? How did Connie go from sitting by herself in the lunchroom to standing by herself on the football field, the crowd cheering as the time-honored symbol of high school popularity was placed onto her head?

This is Connie’s story. But it is also her classmates’ story.

Dale Timmons’ friends have been calling her “the Queen” ever since she was the 2004 Kansas Teacher of the Year. She is a lifelong special education teacher, now at Fret Creek Elementary. She writes a blog about her experiences. And after Connie Dunbar was named homecoming queen at Sunflower, Timmons recalled when the teen was entering kindergarten at Sunflower Elementary.

Marlene Dunbar sat down with school officials, saying she wanted her daughter to be included in a traditional kindergarten class.

“Although inclusion was the new buzz word, it was not really being done in the county at the time - at least not with the significant challenges that Connie had,” Timmons said.

Although there certainly were some “bumps in the road,” by the end of the year everyone was quite pleased with the results. Not just because Connie had made progress learning, maturing and making friends, but because of how she had affected her classmates.

“The other children in that class had learned from Connie,” Timmons wrote on her blog. “In fact, they had learned the most. They had learned how to be helpful without doing it for her. They had learned empathy.”

Timmons has tried to keep up with Connie. She remembers getting a call from Marlene Dunbar to tell her that Connie had been invited to her first sleepover. The two women cried about that. When Timmons got an e-mail saying that Connie had been nominated for homecoming queen, there were more tears. And when she

saw the picture from that night on the football field ... ---

Quite a few people, even some at Sunflower, tried to steer her away from going to school there. They worried whether she would fit in, whether she would get picked on, whether she'd be safe. Maybe, they said, she'd be better off at John Brown, in a program tailored for special needs students.

But her parents were determined this was what was right for her. And even more, Connie was determined.

She always has been. Her father recalls that Connie always wanted to do whatever her sisters were doing. She often failed. But she also often succeeded. She learned to ride a bike (no easy task). She plays soccer, shoots basketball and bowls. And she wanted to go to Sunflower.

"I was scared," her mother said. "You're dropping your child off with 800 students. You hear so much bad stuff, you don't really trust other students. I had my doubts."

The doubts didn't go away instantly; it was a gradual process. By her junior year, Connie's mother would still show up on Tuesdays, bringing her daughter lunch. But Connie no longer wanted Mom to stay with her and eat. She had friends sitting with her.

"It became, 'Thanks, bye,'" Marlene Dunbar recalls with a smile.

Still, it's a long way from having friends to sit with in the lunchroom to riding around the football stadium in a convertible.

Sunflower principal Raegan Turner and others say the tipping point — the event that might have ensured Connie being crowned — was something called Challenge Day. It's a national program that integrates into schools and, over the course of several intense days, attempts to break down cliques, open communication and unite students.

The students split into groups and start one exercise by saying, "If you really knew me ..."

If you knew Connie, her sisters have been saying for 18 years, you'd realize how much she is just like everyone else. Only better.

When Connie was 11, her oldest sister, Layla, then a student at Wichita State University, wrote a beautiful story for the school newspaper titled, "My Little Bumblebee." In it, she explained that where others see someone with disabilities, she sees someone with abilities. The ability to teach, to dream, to change those around her and, like a bumblebee in flight, to defy logic and expectations.

At the time, Layla expressed frustration that others couldn't see this in her little sister, that other kids would point and stare or, perhaps even worse, respond with a sympathetic "awww."

"I hate the word 'normal,'" she wrote. "It has become a forbidden word in my family. ... In the 'normal' world, supermodels and bodybuilding men are esteemed. ... In my opinion, Connie should be the standard. And not so that people can feel sorry for her, but so that they can learn from her and be blessed by her."

If you go by dreams and aspirations, Connie was normal. She wanted a job. She wanted to drive a red sports car. She wanted to play spin-the-bottle on her 12th birthday.

Homecoming queen? That wasn't mentioned in her big sister's story, because six years ago, who would've dared to even dream such things? ---

At Sunflower, the process of picking a king and queen begins with clubs and teams nominating candidates. Jesse Huge, for instance, was nominated for king by the senior class. Connie was nominated for queen by the bowling club. When the students voted, they chose from a list of dozens of names.

Connie's family was just thrilled her name was on the list. But her mother figured they would get to go shopping for dresses, Connie would have a blast being a part of the homecoming events, and that would be it.

And although we'll never know for sure, maybe that would have been it if not for Challenge Day.

It actually was four days, each session with about 100 students. Connie was a part of the fourth day. A big part, says teacher Janie Durban.

"By the end of the day, everybody in there knew who she was," Durban said.

At the end of Challenge Day, after the students have gone through a series of emotional exercises, they are given a chance to speak to the entire group. About 15 students spoke. One of them was Connie.

She said to her classmates, "I love you guys." And then she said she was sorry if she had ever hurt anyone.

Those who know her say she can be moody and she can get angry, but she never has hurt anyone. So that willingness to stand up and speak, and to make that comment - she was sorry if she ever hurt anyone - led to a spontaneous reaction on Challenge Day.

All of the students went to hug her.

In the days after that, Durban said, she overheard students saying, "I'm voting for Connie." "And it wasn't because she had Down syndrome," she said. "It was because they were impressed by her strength, and they realized she was one of them. It was meant to be." ---

In hindsight, her parents realize that maybe the vote shouldn't have come as a total shock. During the parade, students kept calling out Connie's name, giving her high-fives, taking her picture. And when her father couldn't make it to a pep rally, her mother gave him this report: It sure seemed like Connie got the biggest hand.

While her parents kept their expectations low, Connie seemed to believe she could and would win.

"All my friends are voting for me," she explained.

Still, when her name was called over the loudspeaker at the football field, the response was pure joy. She let out a yell. She jumped up and down. She beamed as she rode around the field, waving to the crowd.

That's part of the story: her reaction. But perhaps even more telling was the reaction of everyone else.

One of Durban's friends sent her an e-mail a few days later, describing the sparkle in the night air, saying it wasn't the stadium lights, it was the reflection of Connie in others. And Durban says in the days after the vote, she never heard the typical jealousy. Everyone merely said it was meant to be.

Don Rosson, a senior whom a couple of teachers selected to be Connie's escort, wasn't embarrassed to be paired with a girl who might not fit the traditional images of a queen. That had been one of Connie's mothers fears about the week. But to the contrary, Rosson seemed to love having played a role in her crowning, riding with her in the parade and being there when her name was announced at the football field.

"That was the high point of the night, Connie's reaction to hearing her name," he said. "Everybody, if they didn't start crying, they were close."

Ever since then, the high school and its queen have been getting e-mails and letters from all over the country. Some have come from parents of children with Down syndrome, saying how this story has given them hope.

Next year Connie will be going to the Emporia State University, undoubtedly facing new challenges. But for now, she is savoring her high school royalty.

"She's working it a little," Don Dunbar said. "I was messing with her last weekend and she held up her hands and said, 'Don't touch the queen!'"

The night she was crowned queen, she went to the homecoming dance in the gym. The king made a point

to find her in the crowd of more than 1,000 people.

Connie's dad remembers something else about the dance. That night, some teachers came up to them and told them about the vote. The teachers said they had started counting the votes and realized Connie wasn't just going to win.

She was going to win by a landslide.

"They said they got choked up," Don Dunbar recalled last week, his voice cracking a bit. "And I still do, too."

Four years ago, they were praying for a friend. And now this.