

'96 Hudson graduate dies in Colorado plane crash

By AMANDA CASANOVA/The Lufkin News | Posted: Sunday, December 1, 2013

Jason Lee Cook once hiked a 14,000-foot mountain just so he could snowboard down. When he was 16, he ran a marathon in Houston. He rode motocross bikes and worked the pit crew for an off-road racing team. He even once snuck backstage at an Ozzy Osborne concert.

"He was always looking to see what else he could do, what he could do next," Cook's mother, Mary, said of her son, who died in a single-engine plane crash Friday in Colorado.

Cook, 36, a 1996 Hudson High School graduate, had been taking flying lessons. On Friday he was making the one-hour flight from Delta, Colo., to Crawford, Colo., where he was scheduled for a final test before he could earn his full flying license.

He left about 8 a.m. About nine hours later, his plane was found just three miles from where he took off, Mary said.

"He wasn't in the air long," Mary said. "We don't know much. The answers to all our questions will come later, but it won't change one thing."

Cook was born in Crockett, but his family moved to Hudson when he was in the eighth grade. After finishing high school, Cook earned a scholarship to Southern Arkansas University, where he met his wife, Lillian, "the love of his life," Mary said.

The couple moved to Montrose, Colo., after they graduated, and Cook took a job as the youngest person to work in the administration department for the Montrose County School District. A few years later, he and his wife launched their own network communications business called OneTrack Communications.

"I know he was very proud of the work he did," his brother, Joel Cook, said. "He made sure everything was right. He was a very hands-on leader."

But it wasn't all about the job for Cook.

"He worked hard and played harder," said his sister-in-law, Saudade Cook.

His family, which includes his younger brothers Joel and Justin, described Cook as adventurous. He loved to hike and camp. He also sponsored a motocross racing team. About a year ago, he started the flying lessons.

"Anytime you were on the phone with him, he had a story," Joel Cook said. "He always had these awesome stories.

"He accomplished everything he set out to do," Joel added.

Cook's best friend, Joshua Smith, who met Cook in the eighth grade in Hudson, said Cook was "hard to keep up with, but a great friend."

“He was the kind of guy that everybody wanted to be around,” said Smith, who named his son after Cook. “He put himself second to everyone else. He was the nicest guy you’d ever meet, and he loved life and lived it to the fullest.”

The National Transportation Safety Board hadn’t released a report as of Sunday night. Funeral arrangements for Cook were pending.

“He was always a good boy, brother, son, friend,” Mary said. “He’ll be missed by everyone who knew him.”

Mother and adopted son spending first Thanksgiving together as a family

By AMANDA CASANOVA/The Lufkin News | Posted: Thursday, November 28, 2013

About five months ago, Lufkin native Megan Malnar helped buckle her newly adopted son into his seat and closed the car door. When she slid into her seat, she started crying behind the wheel. After months of paperwork, Malnar had finally been given approval for the adoption of Elijah David, a Zambian orphan.

“‘Eli,’ I told him. ‘Eli, the adoption is finished,’” Malnar said.

Malnar said she’ll never forget the 5-year-old’s response: “Mommy, that means we are for real family,” he said.

Malnar had been fostering Eli since August 2012 when she was working as a missionary in Zambia in Africa. She was working with Family Legacy, a nonprofit organization that helps orphaned children in Zambia.

“The Lord had called me to adopt,” Malnar said. “In January 2012, I started praying about it, and in May, I saw a picture of him, and I knew that was him. I went to the orphanage and spent some time with him, and it was clear that he was meant to be my little boy.”

But adopting Eli would be difficult. Laws required that she get signed consent from his living relatives, and the process was expensive.

“I knew it was going to be costly to adopt him, about \$7,000,” Malnar said. “A family friend came up with the idea to fund-raise online. Within a matter of three weeks, we had \$7,500 come in. It was amazing.”

When the paperwork was finished, Malnar and Eli moved back to the United States, where Malnar took a job in the Southlake school district as a teacher. Eli is also attending school in the district.

“It’s definitely been difficult being a single mom, but it’s totally worth it,” Malnar said. “There are definitely moments of total joy and utter exhaustion and fears that I’m never going to be good enough. In the end, it’s almost like every day is a new day, and I see so much he has grown in a year. It’s all worth it.”

In photos, Eli is bright-eyed, sporting a huge grin of baby teeth, and just like most American boys his age, he loves Captain America, Iron Man, movies and popcorn.

“He loves America,” Malnar said.

“Mommy, we’re not going to go back to Zambia — only to visit, but we’ll come back to America and live,” Eli tells Malnar.

Today, Eli will spend his first Thanksgiving with his new family, including his baby cousin, who was born Tuesday.

For Malnar, this Thanksgiving is her first as a mom, but she said she wouldn’t have it any other way.

“We’re are a family,” she said. “It doesn’t matter the color. It doesn’t matter if he came from me. We’re a family.”

Nonprofit organization providing companion dog to boy who suffers seizures

By AMANDA CASANOVA/The Lufkin News | Posted: Thursday, October 17, 2013 12:45 am

Three-year-old Jacob Stewart chased his brother around their house on a rainy afternoon, the cape from his Batman costume flailing behind him. He had just finished a lollipop and suited up in his Halloween costume to play with his 5-year-old brother, Joshua, who was dressed in a Green Lantern costume.

The two bounced around the living room, a pair of superheroes locked in battle. The boys' parents, John and Shanelle Stewart, watched Jacob carefully because though he seems like any other 3-year-old boy, Jacob needs constant supervision because of daily seizures that cripple him.

"We have to watch him 24/7," John said. "He can't even go into the next room and watch a movie by himself. He has to be watched."

At the same time, Jacob, like any other growing boy, wants his independence.

"He's asking to do things on his own, like go to the bathroom," Shanelle said. "He just wants to be more independent."

With the support of the community and church family, Jacob might get a little more freedom and the Stewart family, which also includes 10-month-old Elizabeth, might get a little help from a four-legged friend. The family was able to raise \$13,000 in six days to become eligible for a seizure alert dog from 4 Paws for Ability, a Ohio-based nonprofit organization.

In a few months, Jacob will travel to Ohio for two weeks of training with the dog, and in about a year the service animal, after its own extensive training, will come home to the Stewarts. Shanelle said they're not sure what the breed will be.

"We have the best community ever," Shanelle said. "It was unbelievable. It just took off and I'm grateful. I would encourage people to continue to donate to 4 Paws. The money isn't going to us. It's going to all the other kids that need help."

Jacob's seizures started more than a year ago. His parents, not knowing what was happening to their son, called an ambulance and made an appointment to see a pediatric neurologist. Two days later, before the appointment, Jacob had another seizure, and the family went to Dallas for answers. He was diagnosed with epilepsy, but his young body resisted the medications for it. Six months later, the seizures worsened. He was then diagnosed with Doose Syndrome, a condition where there is no known cause for the seizures and in which the seizures originate from all over the brain.

Jacob's seizures vary in intensity, and sometimes he can have up to 100 seizures in a single day, his

mom said.

“It’s stressful sometimes,” Shanelle said. “The biggest thing we’re worried about is that the death rate is double for people with seizures in their sleep. With the dog, the dog would sleep with Jacob and alert us when he has a seizure.”

4 Paws for Ability, Inc. launched in 1998 in Ohio. The nonprofit organization provides service dogs to children and veterans all over the world. 4 Paws trains service dogs for work in autism assistance, diabetic alert, hearing ear and seizure assistance.

In many cases, the seizure assistance dogs can alert the family before the child has a seizure. Experts have said that the dog smells a chemical body change on the child before the seizure.

For now, Jacob isn’t able to tell his parents when he’s about to seizure. Most of the time, they confuse him. Shanelle said they hope the dog will help Jacob gain some independence and maybe make a new friend.

“(His condition) is not treatable,” Shanelle said. “It’s more or less just trying to get him a better quality of life and trying to manage the best way we can.”

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Angelina County Mounted Patrol disbands after 60 years

By AMANDA CASANOVA/The Lufkin News | Posted: Sunday, November 3, 2013 1:00 am

The Angelina County Mounted Patrol, known for their crisp red shirts, blue jeans and horsemanship, made their last ride around the George H. Henderson, Jr. Exposition Center arena earlier this year.

After nearly 60 years, the Angelina County Mounted Patrol has disbanded and will no longer cosponsor the Angelina Benefit Rodeo with the Lufkin Host Lions Club.

“We’ve performed at the rodeo every year. This was our last year,” said Debbie Lee, former officer for the patrol. “There’s lots of sadness, lots of tears. It was a multi-generational group, and some of these guys have been with it a long time.”

The Angelina County Mounted Patrol formed in 1955 at the request of Angelina County Sheriff Leon Jones. The extra group of manpower was dubbed “The Angelina County Sheriff’s Posse.” That same year, the group launched an all-girls rodeo and donated proceeds from the event to the Angelina County Treatment Center, later renamed the Wilson McKewen Treatment Center. As the rodeo grew, the site of the annual event changed until the expo center was built in 1983, becoming home to the renamed Angelina County Mounted Patrol.

The patrol went on to perform their drills in places including Houston, Shreveport, Beaumont and San Augustine.

“We’ve had some good riders over the years,” said Denton McCoy, one of the founding members of the patrol.

The patrol had 15 members when it disbanded.

“It’s mostly due to numbers,” Lee said. “We have to have a dedicated group of people, and it’s a time-consuming job.”

“And some of us just got old,” said Kenneth Pinner, who has been with the group since the start and is now in his 80s.

To honor the Mounted Patrol’s work, the George H. Henderson, Jr. Exposition Center has framed one of the group’s flags in the center’s Wall of Honor room.

“The flag is a nice way to let them know how much of a contribution they made,” said Burt Hairgrove, manager of the expo center. “We want people to visit and get an idea of what they did.”

Although the group isn’t together anymore, Lee said they will continue to stay involved.

“We’ve done community service for the past 55 years,” she said. “As individuals, we will volunteer to

work events. Things change. It's the end of an era.”

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Barnes looking to build a community at FUMC

By AMANDA CASANOVA/The Lufkin News | Posted: Saturday, September 14, 2013 1:00 am

As the student pastor for Wallace United Methodist Church in Canton, Texas, Grant Barnes worked in a church of about 600 people. So when he took a job at First United Methodist Church in Lufkin, which has about three times as many people as the Canton church, Barnes said he knew things would be different.

“Moving here was definitely a big leap,” he said.

Barnes moved to Lufkin in June to take on the church’s role as the associate pastor for evangelism, assimilation and small groups. He started work on July 1.

“I wasn’t sure what to expect, but now that I’ve been here, I’ve seen how it’s a great community and a great church that really does a lot of community-oriented stuff,” Barnes said.

In his role, Barnes is responsible for managing bible studies in the church and also welcoming new members to the church.

“I want to help people grow in their faith,” he said. “I want to help this church grow deeper in faith. I think a place like this church needs to have strong roots.”

Part of that work includes reaching out to the community, and a new 6:30 p.m. Saturday worship service, slated to launch in November, could help do that, Barnes said.

“A lot of people visit church for a few weeks, but they won’t make any strong connections,” Barnes said. “I’m interested in helping to build up a community so people can form friendships.”

Initially, Barnes pursued an English degree at Texas State University in San Marcos so he could become a teacher. He graduated with the English degree and a minor in history, but he didn’t head to the classroom as a teacher. Instead, Barnes went back to school — this time the Perkins School of Theology at Southern Methodist University in Dallas.

“It took me about two years to realize what I wanted to do. And God changed my mind and that was scary, and at the same time it was exciting,” he said. “I didn’t know fully what I was getting into when I chose to go to theology school, and the only way I could understand it was to jump in feet first.

“Now, I couldn’t imagine being anywhere else.”

Barnes blogs at www.nerdcoretheology.com and can be reached at 639-3141.

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Moms-to-be can skip drives to Houston thanks to remote ultrasound machine in Lufkin

By AMANDA CASANOVA/The Lufkin News | Posted: Monday, August 19, 2013 1:30 am

Chrystal Roberts can't make the drive to Houston to see a specialist for her high-risk pregnancy, and so instead of finding a friend or family member to take her to get her growing baby girl checked, the doctor came to her — through a 24-inch screen.

"I think it's awesome," Roberts said. "It's just like the doctor being there, and he's there on the TV screen. He can see all the pictures (on the ultrasound). There's nothing I saw that he didn't see."

The screen is part of a telemedicine unit that works "like a TV monitor," said Rebecca Petty, radiology director for Woodland Heights Medical Center. Using the device, the Houston perinatologist, who specializes in high-risk pregnancies, is able to dial into the ultrasound room via monitor. A sonographer will scan the patient and the doctor can see and talk to the patient.

"It keeps the patient from having to make the drive to Houston," Petty said.

The device is the only one of its kind in East Texas for moms-to-be with diabetes, high blood pressure or those carrying multiple babies.

"We are excited to offer this service to the women in our area," said Casey Robertson, CEO of Woodland Heights. "Not only does it provide them with access to the top maternal fetal medicine specialists in Houston, it also lets them do so from the comforts of Lufkin. High-risk pregnancies are hard enough on moms without having to worry about traveling long distances for a doctor's visit; our ultrasound telemedicine takes that worry off their shoulders. The convenience this service provides the patient is unmatched in this area."

Roberts, who was the first patient to use the unit in Lufkin, has since used the device twice. Depending on upcoming visits with her doctor, her baby could be born as soon as the end of this month.

"Everything is looking great," she said, adding that the baby girl will be named Joy Lynn Dunn after her late father.

The unit is meant to be used for follow-up exams after patients have had a face-to-face meeting with their perinatologist. The Houston doctors, members of a maternal fetal medicine group, visit Woodland Heights on the first and third Tuesdays of the month to meet with patients as part of a partnership with Houston's Texas Women's hospital. The telemedicine unit can then link the medical center's ultrasound equipment so the perinatologists can read ultrasounds in real time.

"The patients are not meeting with strangers," said Kim Lovelace, lead sonographer for Woodland Heights Medical Center. "It's their doctor. They have all their previous information and history."

Medical center officials expect the device to become a regular tool for the sonographers and free up the doctors' schedule for more patients on their Tuesday visits to Lufkin.

"I think it's the future of medicine," Petty said. "This is our first time to venture into that territory, and we expect this program to grow."

Woodland Heights Medical Center was chosen as a site for the unit because of the excellence and skill from the sonographers, Petty said. That team includes Lovelace, Carla Murphy, Tiffanie Colbert and Frances Adams.

"It's about convenience," Lovelace said. "(This unit) saves them the drive. It saves them gas money. It saves them that hotel bill."

The telemedicine unit is a welcome precursor to improved services already planned for the medical center, Petty said. The medical center is expected to open Lufkin's first Level 2 Neonatal Intensive Care Unit by January 2014. The \$4.5 million project will offer care for Level 2 babies, who are sick or premature infants that require extra attention through temperature, blood, weight and nutrient monitoring. Currently, Level 2 babies have to be taken to hospitals out of town.

According to the Washington, D.C.-based American Telemedicine Association, there are about 3,500 service sites in the nation that use some form of telemedicine.

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