

DADDO

One year ago today, the body of freshman Joe Dado was found in a stairwell between the Steidle and Hosler buildings. Those who knew and loved the 18-year-old soccer captain from Latrobe say the Penn State community lost someone extraordinary.

Anniversary offers chance for reflection

By Casey McDermott
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"You were met by Joe's eyes and smile before anything else — always his eyes, always his smile, and then his kindness."

Jerry Ferraro
Dado's soccer coach

LATROBE — Joe Dado is the reason Jonathan "JJ" Hue fell in love with football Saturdays at Beaver Stadium. He was the one who invited Hue, who had never been to a game before, to join him for the Indiana vs. Penn State match in the fall of 2008.

Joe's the reason Susan Kuhn, his high school guidance counselor, now drives her son to and from countless soccer practices each week. He was the one who shared insight gained from a life spent honing his passion for the sport when she came to him with questions about which club team would be best for her son.

Joe's the reason his friend Mike Cook, his former English teacher Jeff Duda and a handful of others at Greater Latrobe Senior High School will chuckle each time they see a can of white spray paint. He was the one who came up with a senior prank that stumped administrators, and even some of his closest friends, as the district tried to figure out who was behind the drawings that showed up on the school's football field one morning.

Joe's also the reason two communities — both in Latrobe and at his new home at Penn State — banded together last September to mourn the loss of a friend, son, brother, student and teammate.

Today, he's the one whose even-keeled, quick-witted demeanor and inextinguishable kindness still lives on in the memories of those whose lives were touched by the 18-year-old before his death.

"There wasn't one person — teacher, student, coach, anyone — who would say anything bad about him," Cook (sophomore-biology) said of his longtime friend Dado, as Hue (sophomore-chemistry) nodded his head.

Both knew Dado as a classmate and teammate growing up in Greater Latrobe School District, and made the transition from their hometown east of Pittsburgh to State College together last year.

In school, they said Dado was reserved, but that didn't mean he wouldn't crack a few jokes or try to liven things up as he saw fit.

Dado was the type to be polite when you first met him, Cook and Hue said, but as soon as he got comfortable with you, his knack for sarcasm quickly came through.

"The thing I liked about him were the subtleties of some of the things he picked on you," Cook said. "It would be the smallest thing, but it would get under your skin."

And Duda said Dado's sardonic sense of humor wasn't just limited to his friends.

"Especially for me, someone who prides himself on sarcasm, I was impressed with his abilities," Duda said. "He would smoke me."

But Dado was still far from a class clown, said his math teacher, Cindy Pompelia.

She remembers Dado — who had hopes of becoming an engineer — as a focused, mild-mannered student. In her calculus class, she said Dado was a man of few words.

"He was just always kind of cool," Pompelia said, imitating Dado's posture as she leaned back into her chair and

surveyed the room. "He would come in after kicking all of these amazing footballs — the kids would all be joking around about it — and he would just smile."

That smile, said Dado's soccer coach of six years, Jerry Ferraro, was his trademark.

"You were met by Joe's eyes and smile before anything else — always his eyes, always his smile, and then his kindness," Ferraro said. "He maintained that innocence that we have in elementary and junior high."

But those close to Dado said it wasn't just his personality that set him apart. His abilities as an athlete, they said, were unmatched not only for his physical talent but also for the attitude he brought to each game.

Dado played soccer for most of his life, Ferraro said, and was "unbelievably gifted" — one of the top players the coach had ever worked with.

But through his entire career, Ferraro said, Dado never let pressure cloud his focus.

As a sophomore, Ferraro said Dado once scored a goal with a few seconds left in overtime — just in time to secure a win against one of Latrobe's biggest rivals.

He went on to lead as a soccer captain both his junior and senior years at Latrobe — no easy feat, Ferraro said.

"Joe's leadership was unique to Joe: It was 'Do as I do,'" Ferraro said. "He did not make anyone feel inferior through their ability or inability."

Cook said Dado was a key force behind Greater Latrobe Senior High School's student section, especially at basketball games.

Dado's efforts to rally school spirit even included organizing a "Cereal Box Night" — one of several theme nights held throughout the school's basketball season, Cook said.

Under Dado's guidance, he said, students lined the court wearing cardboard "cereal boxes" they'd decorated with the nicknames of their team's top players, bearing titles like "Campbell's Loops" and "Apple Zachs."

Dado's friends said the student section was one of the few times when their otherwise reserved friend would break out of his shell.

But, Cook and Hue said, Dado's personality always shone its strongest around his family.

Hue spent the weekend with the Dado family during his high school visit to Penn State, and he said he'd never seen his friend as talkative as he was when he was around his sisters or parents.

Hue said Dado loved hanging out with his father, Joe, mother, Denise, and sisters: Natalie, Nicole and Jennifer. He'd even pass up the chance to hang out with his friends on the weekends if his family was doing something together, often telling Hue and others he was planning to enjoy a dinner at home.

"That is one of the closest-knit families I know," Hue said.

When Dado began looking to college, Hue said he'd frequently joke that he wasn't planning to apply to Penn State, despite his family's passion for the university.

But Kuhn said she heard a different sentiment when she met with Dado to discuss his plans after high school. When she asked him where he wanted to go, she said he made it clear he wanted to keep his family's ties to the blue and white.

She said she jokingly asked Dado if he really wanted to go to a school where his sisters would be so close by — only to have him reply that yes, he did really want to attend Penn State with his sisters.

"I go, 'You don't want to go there, do you?' And he goes, 'Yeah,'" Kuhn said. "He was so sincere, like, 'Yes, I love my sisters' — and they loved him right back."

At about 7 p.m. on Sept. 21, 2009, Ferraro received a text message bearing the news of Dado's death.

He said he turned to his cousin, a youth minister at Charter Oak United Methodist Church in Latrobe, and asked him to open the church's doors to students as a place to cope. Soon, by word of mouth, Dado's peers started pouring into the pews.

"The chapel in the back of the church filled with previous boys' soccer players, current boys' soccer players, future boys' soccer players who saw their role model pass," Ferraro said.

In the coming days, Ferraro and the other teachers said



the high school also became a place where students — both past and present — turned to deal with the loss.

"To see the impact that it had on not only the students that were here and the students who graduated, the impact across the board — even for teachers who didn't have him, it was..." Duda said, hesitating. "It was a wave. It was like a tidal wave of depression, confusion and anger."

Kuhn said she immediately received visits from students who graduated with Dado the past spring and were now looking for a place to turn. The high school, she said, was still "home" for Dado's graduating class — many of whom had barely settled into life at college when they heard about their friend's death.

To Duda, coming back to the school was also the students' way of reconnecting with Dado one last time.

"They could meet here, they could walk down the halls," he said. "And the last time they were here, Joe was here."

And in the months following Dado's death, Kuhn said the support stayed strong.

In his memory, the Dado family established a memorial scholarship at Latrobe High School given annually to one male soccer player and one female soccer player.

The first two winners, Nathaniel Helfferich and Hilary Bastin — along with the other applicants — knew this was an application that needed to be taken seriously, Kuhn said.

"When I give scholarships out I say you have to write an essay, kids walk away — but with this one, it was typed, they got it back promptly," Kuhn said. "It just shows you what the people thought of the family, and of Joe."

Dado's team found itself on a night when the Latrobe boys' soccer team found itself against the same opponent Joe had trounced with his last-minute goal years earlier.

Ferraro said he was at the game, accompanied by other soccer alumni who were in the area to pay their respects.

For many past players in attendance, Ferraro said, the match was a chance to reconnect with old friends as they grieved the loss of a former teammate.

As the alumni watched together from the stands, the game looked as though it would fall through for Latrobe — they were down 1-0, Ferraro said, and the clock was quickly winding down.

But then someone made a last-ditch pass to one of the new players on the team, Ferraro said, who volleyed the soccer ball through the air toward the goal.

With only a few seconds left, the ball hit the net. The crowd of Joe's former teammates erupted into cheers, and Dado's former coach said he couldn't help but think of a similar game-winning play he'd seen a few years earlier.

"I just had to laugh, it was totally his hand — or foot, in this case," Ferraro said. "Joe, in my opinion, scored one more goal that night."

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Cindy Pompelia, Dado's calculus teacher, and Jerry Ferraro, Dado's soccer coach, look at photos of his class.

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