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▲ A student in Bastrop ISD browses the donated clothes offerings in Christian's Closet.

BASTROP ISD

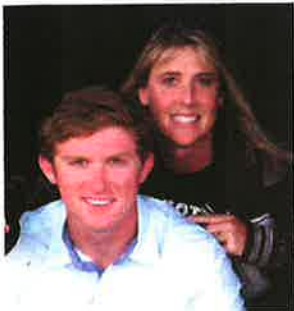
From a tragedy comes an outpouring of help, hope in Bastrop ISD

by Bobby Hawthorne



Superintendent
Barry Edwards

Christian Harman was a talker. Even as a toddler, he would waddle up to strangers and strike up a conversation, and if it seemed



▲ Christian Harman, for whom Christian's Closet is named, with his mother, Carmene, a math teacher at Bastrop Middle School.

to Christian that the stranger might need something he could provide, then Christian would provide it because it bothered him to see people going without.

He was a giver, too. When a classmate forgot to bring his lunch or didn't have a lunch to forget, Christian offered

him half his sandwich. One chilly day, he gave his jacket to a boy who didn't appear to own one.

Christian was equally generous with his time. After his grandfather suffered a stroke and was later diagnosed with bone cancer, Christian stepped up. If his grandfather's yard needed mowing, Christian mowed it. When his grandfather had a doctor's appointment, Christian tagged along to help get him in and out of the truck.

When cancer ultimately robbed his grandfather of his ability to drive, Christian would swing by after school, load him up and take him to the Dairy Queen in Bastrop or drive him over to Paige, where the family owns 77 acres along Pin Oak Creek. They'd sit and watch for deer and talk until dusk because he was a talker.

Christian was probably talking when his heart ruptured in June of 2017. He had returned from



Megan Hancock

a day of fishing out of Port O'Connor and was helping a friend's mother move some boxes in a garage when it happened. Paramedics worked frantically for 45 minutes to revive him, but the autopsy revealed an enlarged heart and confirmed that he was essentially dead by the time he hit the concrete floor.

Megan Hancock didn't know Christian. He wasn't a member of the Bastrop High Student Council, which she'd sponsored for two years, and he wasn't in any of her leadership classes, but when she learned of his death, her stomach dropped. "Total disbelief," she said.

A few days later, she contacted her StuCo officers and proposed to them a plan that, she thought, would not only honor the boy who, as a classmate noted, "would literally give you the shirt off his back," it would also provide the shirt. The project — a care closet — would be an extension of a larger districtwide effort to encourage students to give back. It would be called "Christian's Closet."

"They were immediately on board," Hancock said. "Since it was their summer vacation, we communicated by text every day. Sometimes, all day. And we started getting processes in place. We asked Christian's sister and Mom if they would be OK with the idea, and they said, 'Absolutely.'"



Barbara Gaona

According to Barbara Gaona, a Bastrop High social worker, the district has about 400 homeless students, K-12. Around 85 percent of them live with someone else, due to financial reasons, and 4 percent are unsheltered. The rest, she said, are listed as "unaccompanied."

"Some families lost everything in the fires and floods," Gaona said. "Some kids have nothing but the clothes they are wearing. Some girls share clothes with younger sisters, and if the clothes don't fit, they get dress-coded. It's not that they're coming to school dressed like this because they want to. It's because it's all they have."



Martha Leal

Martha Leal, a counselor at Lost Pines Elementary, said she sees this every day.

"Our school is about 89 percent economically disadvantaged," she said. "We have students who don't own a decent pair of shoes. The other day,

a kid came in, and his pants were so small, he couldn't even button them. The pants legs didn't even cover his ankles."

This is a serious problem, and it's not about fashion or bling. Inadequate clothing has been correlated to dropout and tardy rates, behavioral issues, poor academic performance, even instances of parental neglect and abuse.

Now in its second year, Christian's Closet has expanded from a single clothing rack inside a BHS portable to full-scale operations on four BISD campuses. The day I visited Bastrop High, jeans and shirts were neatly stacked on shelves or hung on metal racks, alongside a Dallas Cowboys hoodie, a rustic-looking serape, six or eight prom dresses and one spaghetti-strap pleated party gown the color of a Pecos cantaloupe. There was also a rack of jackets, coats and sweaters that will soon be in high demand.

Lined up on shoe racks were high heels, wedges and loafers; athletic shoes of all sorts; one pair of brand-new black cowboy boots, size 7 or 8; and canvas sneakers studded with sequins for third- or fourth-grade girls.

All of it is free. People talk about "shopping" at Christian's Closet, but there's no charge. If students were ever embarrassed to be seen carrying out a sweatshirt or a pair of khakis, they aren't now. They may be skittish about over-reaching, but there's no stigma.

"At first, we had to say to them, 'If you need something, go get it. If you need two, take two,'" Leal said. "And the kids would say, 'Oh no, Miss. I'll just take this and leave that. Someone else might need it more.' These are our neediest students, and yet they didn't want to take more than what they think is their share."

Hancock is no longer StuCo sponsor. She is 34, the mother of four and will be the mother of five if the adoption of a 1 1/2-year-old boy she and her husband have been fostering goes through. They're pretty sure it will.

Last year, she accepted an administrative position as a communication specialist. It meshes better with her family duties, but she said she misses the day-to-day interaction with students. Either way, she's still as gung-ho about Christian's Corner as ever.

"It's grown so fast," she said. "I can't believe how much support we received from the community. It's been amazing."

Carrie Paulo is the new StuCo advisor. She comes from an audio/visual and technology background, and it didn't take her long to embrace the program either. She told me about accompanying a girl who picked out the pair of shoes that her own son had donated a day or two before. The girl was so excited to have them, and Paulo made sure her son understood his own good fortune.

Another time, Paulo said, a needy student seemed unable to believe that such generosity is possible.

"People really do this for kids who aren't theirs?" the student asked her.

Well, yes, they do. And, speaking of good fortune, Paulo's husband learned he too has a heart condition because he underwent a comprehensive physical exam. Again, Christian was a giver.



Brad Brown

Brad Brown, who's in his third year as Bastrop High principal, said Christian's Closet has further deepened a culture of caring on campus.

"If someone has worn the same clothes several days in a row, a student might refer him or her to Christian's Corner," he said. "Or they might ask a teacher to keep an eye out for the kid who's worn the same clothes for several days in a row. So, kids are often our biggest recruiters."

Junior Zoey Croft is one of those kids. She's a StuCo officer, and her best friend is Caitlyn Harman — Christian's younger sister.

"What I've learned from all of this is to care about something bigger than myself," Zoey said. "It helps me understand that people are struggling, and even though I'm this young, I can help them. A good friend and I were organizing clothes in the Bastrop High pantry, and the next day, we saw a girl wearing the blouse we had just put out. So, I see it, first-hand, the impact Christian's Corner is having."

I asked Carmene Harman — Christian's mother who teaches math at Bastrop Middle School — what she believed the essential message of this story should be, and she replied, "Over and above Christian, it's about the community. Any school can create a program like this. We started out very small, just a shelf in a corner of a tiny room, and it's grown into all of this," and there's too much of "this" to discuss in this short article.

Of course, she mentioned Christian again. He was planning to attend Blinn College for one year, then transfer to A&M to join another special culture of caring.

"He was always concerned about other people," Mrs. Harman added. "He was always willing to help, to get involved. He had such a big heart."

BOBBY HAWTHORNE is the author of "Longhorn Football" and "Home Field," published by UT Press. In 2005, he retired as director of academics for the University Interscholastic League.