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Loved ones gather to remember fallen Sgt. Christopher Abeyta

Comments

March 28, 2009

BY LAUREN FITZPATRICK Staff writer

Those who loved Sgt. Christopher Abeyta exited his funeral visitation Friday full of stories about a young charismatic soldier, a goofy friend, and a sweet mama's boy wise beyond his 23 years who made each person he met feel like a million bucks.

A steady wave of mourners passed through Hickey Memorial Chapel Friday to pay their respects, to read a stream of farewells rolling on a TV screen, to look at photos of Abeyta throughout his life. The scene was full of emotion that caught up with one of the honor guards stationed at Abeyta's casket. The sergeant from Midlothian was killed March 15 by a roadside bomb in Afghanistan.

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Niki Mireles remembers her friend Illinois National Guard Sgt. Christopher Abeyta during the wake. Mireles' husband, Jon, was best friends with Abeyta. Niki said Abeyta aided her while her husband was deployed for a year and a half. (Art Vassy — SouthtownStar)

His parents, Barbara and Paul Abeyta, received Gold Star lapel pins at the start of the visitation. The pins match a banner already hanging in a window at home - a sign a loved one was killed in action. They passed out a handful of pins among relatives and their son's closest friends.

Abeyta's best friend, Jon Mireles, also handed out some black rubber bracelets stamped with WWCPD? "Please take this special gift as a token of our gratitude," read a little card signed by Mireles and his wife, Niki. "When you wear it, remember the happiness that Christopher brought to your life and think: 'What would Christopher Paul do?'"

Outside the crowded funeral home, mourners remembered.

Jennifer McDonald, 24, was a friend of seven years, hosted Chris last summer in Orlando, Fla., where she lives.

"Chris came to visit me about a week and a half before he was deployed and we went to Epcot (Theme Park at Disneyland), and he made sure that we stopped in every single country at Epcot and he had to try on at least one hat and get a picture with at least one hat from every single country. And that spanned the whole, well, we're at the Magic Kingdom, I have to try on Mickey and Goofy and the sorcerer's hat - and just, every single hat.

"My favorite hat he actually tried on was the only beret we could find in France, and it was bright pink. The only hat he ended up buying was a cowboy hat in Sea World, and we went out to the House of Blues and he wore dress pants with a button up shirt and a tie with his cowboy hat "



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were cross pants with a button up shirt and a tie with the cowboy hat.

James Vezina, married Chris' grandmother Elvira when Chris' dad was little.

"When he was little, he used to come by the house, he had his little glasses. I used to call him the professor because he was all neat. He'd always be making something. I gave him some rope one time. He had the rope up over a tree. He had the rope all over the back yard. It was just a pleasure watching him grow. It was like watching 'The Adventures of Christopher.' "

Jamie Donovan, 24, of Crestwood, was a year older than Chris at Bremen High School.

"His freshman year and my sophomore year we had an early morning class that started at 7 a.m., and we used to take the 5 a.m. bus together. Chris would walk from his house to my house and pick me up and we would wait at 5 o'clock in the morning, we would take this bus together.

"I had knee surgery that year, and Chris did everything he could to make it more comfortable for me, that 5 a.m. bus ride, as bad as it was, to make it as good for me. He'd carry my books, he'd walk me to class. And some of my favorite memories of him are spending that time together in the morning."

Jon Mireles has been Chris' best friend since they were kids. One night at ages 12 and 13, they were home alone at Abeyta's house, then in Markham.

"His dad used to work at the Carol Buddig (lunch meat) plant, and he used to bring home these big, long sausages. They were really skinny, tiny sausages. So one night Chris and I thought it would be a good idea to have a sausage whip fest. So here we are, running around the house when his parents aren't home and we're taking these sausages and we're beating the crap out of each other with them. Literally, just as hard as we can, whipping each other with these things.

"By the end of the night, we're full of welts. I think he might even have drew blood on me, one time, he hit me so hard. They went from very nice sausages to falling apart, and the plastic was all stretched out and whatnot. And his parents came home and they went to bed.

"We didn't get in trouble for destroying the sausages but his mom did yell at us for welting each other."

"And it was a beautiful night. He had a big wooden front porch deck. We laid out underneath the full moon and we remarked about how we were never going to get these moments again. It was something that was just perfect. We sat out under the stars and we talked like two teenagers would talk to each other but somehow ahead of our years, just remarking at what a beautiful night it was and talking about whatever we wanted to talk about underneath the stars. That was something I really remember.

"There was this one night too, at their old apartment in Midlothian. I don't remember what we were doing and we couldn't have been 17 or 18 years old. And we walked in the house, we walked in his mom's apartment at like 2 a.m. And we didn't drink back then or anything like that, but we had been out at somebody's house probably, doing something stupid. We were being all quiet since his parents were in the bed and whatnot and we didn't want to wake them up. It's pitch black and we walk into the hallway and you can see down the hallway to the kitchen and we could tell his mom was sitting there because all you could see the red glow of the cigarette as she sat there at the table smoking it, waiting for us to walk in the door. And she said, 'Where have you guys been?' And we went into our fake spiel about how we had been at my house. And she proceeded to yell at him - and me - and told us if we ever came in that late again she was going to pound both of us. So we decided to tell her if we ever were going to come in late again like that."

"He was deep, complex person. I always considered myself beyond my time, a little but older than I actually am, and after he came back from Iraq, he really developed that maturity that even I haven't (found.) He had learned to appreciate the arts and books and music that I never really bothered to take a second look at. He was so intellectual. He's one of the good ones. We're worse without him. The world isn't as bright as it was when he was in my life."

Niki Mireles met Chris seven years ago when she met her husband.

"Jon went on deployment for a year and a half, and Christopher took care of me when he was gone. He said he was my second husband. He came over and cooked me dinner a few times, and he was just there in case I needed anything. I needed a shoulder to cry on half the time, and he was always there. Just the sweetest person and the goofiest person. We just love him so much."

Sgt. 1st Class Keith Summerville, of the 33rd Infantry Brigade Combat Team, Illinois Army National Guard, has been the Abeyta's military liaison since his death, and gave them their Gold Star pins.

"As we all know, those of us who have preceded us wearing this uniform gave their best. They gave the ultimate sacrifice because they believed in what they had done. They did it for one reason to protect their families and to protect all of us. On behalf of me and my little brother, Chris, I thank all of you."

Abeyta's co-workers - Tonja Anderson, Janelle Kent, LaDonna Williams, Elizabeth Van Ella and Brian O'Neill - from the Chicago company where he had worked as a criminal background investigator swapped goofy stories.

Tonja Anderson was his last boss.

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"He was a great dance partner, ask Brian! In January, we had a holiday party and he was the life of the party. He was a shot glass collector. He loved to play pool. He was a mama's boy and oh my gosh, and he was so proud of it. He talked to his mom 4 or 5 times a day during work. Finally I said, Chris, "You're a mama's boy, oh my gosh, and he said. 'Yeah, but I don't do anything wrong. And I said, 'Yes you do, your mom's lying.' I picked up the phone and said, 'Can you tell him you're lying?' And she said, 'When you have a son whose gone to war and comes back, he can do no wrong'. And I get that. He would gladly tell you he was a mama's boy and he loved his mama."

Elizabeth Van Ella owned the company when Chris first started working there.

"He had such beautiful posture when he stood up. He had a lot presence. He was very proud of himself. But he told me I looked beautiful every day. 'Mrs. V, you're looking so good today. You should wear that blue more often.' It's all I needed to hear."

Janelle Kent called Chris a charming flirt. He fed her the daily "beautiful" line, too.

"Us too! He was supposed to be my Army husband. He was going to marry me. I'm his wife, this is his girlfriend of the office."

"Girlfriend" LaDonna Williams remembered Chris' favorite snack at work, a snack they all bought when they learned of his death.

"The sunflower seeds! They had sunflower seeds in the gumball machine. They took the gum out and put sunflower seeds in the gumball machine!

"He was charismatic and such a gentleman. Opened doors."

Brian O'Neill went to a White Sox outing with the ladies and Chris before he deployed, and apparently, danced up a storm with Chris at the holiday party.

"He was a troublemaker and a goofball, but he didn't hide that he was sharp as a tack and was really just a fundamentally decent guy."

Lauren FitzPatrick can be reached at lfitzpatrick@southtownstar.com or (708) 802-8832.

Paying respects

A funeral Mass for Illinois National Guard Sgt. Christopher Abeyta will be at 10 a.m. today at St. Christopher Church, 4130 147th St., Midlothian, to be followed by burial at Abraham Lincoln National Cemetery in Elwood.

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