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Fairport bids farewell to 4 beloved young women

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Senior editor

On a day filled with funerals, Fairport said goodbye Monday to four of the five recent high school graduates who died in a head-on crash last Tuesday.

Separate services were held for Hannah Congdon, Katherine "Katie" Shirley, Sara Monnat and Bailey Goodman. Services for Meredith McClure will take place this afternoon.

More than 1,000 people were at each of the ceremonies Monday, and many people attended all four and will go to the fifth today.

"I have done young peoples' funerals, but never in multiples, never on the same day and never with such a great tragedy," said the Rev. Edward Palumbos of the Church of the Assumption in Fairport, who celebrated two of the four funerals and attended all of them. "To have five is just incredible."

The women died when their car collided with a tractor-trailer truck in East Bloomfield, Ontario County. They were on their way to a family cottage on Keuka Lake.

The driver of the tractor-trailer escaped injury, as did four women from Perinton who were following in a second car.

The deaths triggered an outpouring of grief and support that hasn't ended.

So many people wanted to attend the funerals that a shuttle bus system was necessary so people could get to the first three funerals on time.

Throughout, there were signs of support for those dealing with an unspeakable grief.

The congregation of St. John of Rochester in Perinton, where the second funeral was held, put out tables of sandwiches and cookies.

"We were worried about the people after the 11 a.m. service," said Leonor Rivera, a member of St. John. "Parishioners have been coming all day with food."

"This is an unusual community," said Jon Hunter, Fairport superintendent of schools, as he arrived at the second funeral. "It's got a heart as big as can be. On the good days, you know it. On the bad days, you need it."

Monday was clearly a day when people needed support.

Girls well into high school or beyond clutched teddy bears.

Boys put on brave faces.

Adults cried and cried some more, all while trying to comfort their children.

Four of the five women who died — Bailey, Hannah, Meredith and Sara — were cheerleaders at Fairport. Katie had cheered for Pop Warner Football.

During the funerals, the teens were referred to as "angels," echoing a term often used by their cheerleading coach to describe her squad.

But the services also made clear, poignantly clear, that the young women were of this Earth. They laughed, they gossiped, they shopped, they cared for others.

While they left a surprisingly full legacy for ones so young, they also left behind a history of silly jokes and strange sounds.

"I will treasure her smile, her sweetness, how funny she was," said Madonna Shirley, Katie's aunt, in a tearful eulogy. "I will laugh at the thoughts of her uncanny imitation of Kip from the movie *Napoleon Dynamite*, her dance moves and when she would laugh so hard, she would snort."

The first funeral

Monday's funerals began at 9 a.m. at the Church of the Assumption in Fairport, with a service for Hannah, who was 18 and the daughter of Marilyn and Terry Congdon. The church was filled to overflowing, as it would be for the later gathering for Sara Monnat.

"We came here not to explain, but to celebrate," Palumbos said to the mourners at the service for Hannah. "Our numbers here attest to our sadness

and the quality of our love and care for one another. There's very little we can control in our lives, mostly ourselves."

Sara Dastin, also a 2007 graduate and a Fairport cheerleader, gave the eulogy, stressing the warmth of Hannah's smile and the size of her heart.

The smile was with Hannah at games as she ran, flipped and tumbled with her cheerleading teammates, her friend said.

It was there as she greeted people.

It would typically take Hannah about 15 minutes to travel down one hallway, Sara said, because there were so many people she knew and had to greet.

Hannah spent her 2006 spring break volunteering with other students in orphanages in Cuddalore, India, a tsunami-wrecked area.

She wanted to be an English teacher in the Peace Corps, Sara said.

"You are the jewel of our lives, today, tomorrow and the rest of our lives ..." said several of Hannah's friends in a poem read during her memorial. "Our angel, our princess ... we love you Hannah."

A rose, a tiara

Hannah's funeral was followed by the 11 a.m. service for Katie at St. John of Rochester.

The large church was nearly filled even before the school buses brought people from Hannah's service.

Katie's funeral, celebrated by the Rev. Peter Clifford, stressed her love of roses and her belief that she was, or at least should be, a princess.

Her picture was placed on a stand on the altar. Before it was a single red rose and a pillow that held a tiara.

The first song was Elton's John's "Candle in the Wind," a version of which was written as a tribute to Princess Diana. The last song was the hymn "On Eagle's Wings," the same song that closed Hannah's service.

Katie, 18, was the only daughter, the only child, of Patrick and Stephanie Shirley.

"But in truth, Katie never was an only child," said Brian Kyhos, a family friend, in his eulogy. "She was raised by many loving people."

At the end of the service, Stephanie Shirley, accompanied by her sister, Sandra Monahan, read a letter to Katie.

It began by noting that even before Katie was born, her father had painted stars on the ceiling of her nursery.

The Shirleys then wished upon those stars, hoping their daughter would be "beautiful, charming, graceful, witty" and much more.

Earlier in the service, Sara Dupra and Riley Hall, two of Katie's friends who had been in the car behind her on the night she died, read a poem celebrating her life.

"You were always late, but it's OK," they wrote. "We'd wait forever for you now."

More goodbyes

After Katie's service, people boarded buses or got in their cars to go to Sara's funeral. Palumbos also celebrated that service, which he said stressed the theme of love's ability to transcend sorrow and hurt.

Sara, who was 18 and the daughter of Angela and James Monnat, was remembered as confident and assertive, a team player known for inspirational notes to fellow cheerleaders.

David Dunn, a friend of the Monnats and principal of Martha Brown School in the Fairport district, gave the eulogy.

"Sara was a cheerleader for cheerleaders, and always had a positive word of encouragement for her peers," he said.

Marcus Merriman, also a 2007 graduate of Fairport High, sang at Sara's funeral, just as he had sung at Katie's. The song he chose was one he had written for his class' graduation.

The "goodbyes" of the lyrics took on a different meaning.

The tears, which hadn't really stopped all day, flowed stronger.

'We are grieving'

Outside the funeral services for Bailey Goodman on Monday night stood crowds of high school teenagers.

Some crouched by the lower windows of the Fairport United Methodist Church, some sat down on the lawn while others stood in the doorway. Hundreds more sat inside.

"We are troubled. We are hurt. We are grieving," said John W. McNeill, pastor at Fairport United. "We can't wrap our heads over this awful tragedy, so all we can do is pray."

Friends and families reminisced about Bailey, 17, daughter of Michael and Sharon Goodman, with stories about how she wore pink fuzzy slippers to her first college party, invented synchronized swimming routines with friends and inspired others to be better in every way.

A soloist summed up with the song "There You'll Be":

"In my dreams, I'll always see you soar above the sky. In my heart, there will always be a place for you for all my life. I'll keep a part of you with me, and everywhere I am, there you'll be."

Includes reporting by Nicole Lee, Ernst Lamothe Jr. and The Associated Press.

Funeral service

The service for Meredith McClure, one of the Perinton teenagers killed in a crash last Tuesday, will be held at 2:30 p.m. today at Browncroft Community Church, 2530 Browncroft Blvd., Penfield.

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