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Out of grief, a new resolve for one valedictorian

Brittany Washum-Bennett set her sights on being the best in her class, and she persevered through the death of her brother

By Jeremy C. Fox | June 14, 2014



Brittany Washum-Bennett is the valedictorian for the class of 2014 at the Match charter school.

Seeing a friend honored as valedictorian at their middle school graduation, Brittany Washum-Bennett vowed that in four years the accolade would be hers.

“I’m like, yeah, that’s going to be me,” Brittany, 17, recalled recently. “I’m going to start high school, and I’m going to be valedictorian.

That competitive impulse set her path, but she could not have foreseen the challenges ahead.

Just months later, on Sept. 28, 2010, Brittany’s half-brother, Levaughn Washum-Garrison, was gunned down — along with his friend Simba Martin, Martin’s girlfriend, Eyanna Flonory, and her 2-year-old son, Amani Smith — in the brutal killings that came to be known as the Mattapan massacre.

That Brittany succeeded in graduating Friday as valedictorian of Match Public Charter High School — that she graduated at all, in circumstances that could have caused her to give up her dreams — is a testament to her belief in her father's mantra, "Hard work pays off"; to her strong will; and to the support of family and educators.

"I feel like I knew that she had that in her," said Anjali Nirmalan, who tutored Brittany her first year at Match, which is in Allston. "But the amount that she was up against to do that, the amount of drive that was going to take — I don't think freshman year I could have known that she would make it all that way.

"There were so many times when she wanted to give up," Nirmalan said, "and I think we had to be stubborn enough to call upon her own inner stubbornness."

Brittany remembers Levaughn as a loving, quick-witted, family-oriented person. Like older brothers everywhere, he was protective of his sister — "too much," Brittany said. Reminiscing at her family's Roslindale home, she sometimes wiped away a tear, but most memories of him brought laughter.

"He used to always pick me up from school, and I used to feel like a superstar, because the music used to always be blasting," she said. "I'm like, 'Yeah, that's my ride.' "

Brittany said Levaughn was in the wrong place at the wrong time that night in 2010, sleeping on the couch of a friend who sold drugs. Levaughn had been arrested before, but at the time of his death, he was working toward his GED and had hopes of a better life, his family said.

Brittany's father, James Bennett, said he could not recall specific charges brought against Levaughn but that he was more a troublemaker than a criminal. "He just had a mouth, always very opinionated…very headstrong, wanted to do things his way," said Bennett, 47.

After Levaughn's death, Brittany missed two weeks of school, and she was no longer the same outgoing, boisterous, often argumentative teen when she returned.

"She was totally silent," Nirmalan said. "Would not speak, would not interact, head down all the time, zero expression on what is one of the most expressive faces I have ever seen."

At Match, days are long, assignments are demanding, and work piles up quickly. While Brittany grieved, her grades suffered. Eventually she brought home her first-ever F.

"I just talked with my dad — he's like, 'You've got to get it together,' " she said.

Bennett said he used Levaughn's memory to motivate Brittany and his two sons. "Levaughn's looking down on you all," he would tell them. "He expects the best from you all. Just do it for him."

Brittany began going to school early and leaving late, spending time with tutors on weekends to catch up. Nirmalan tried to make academics a refuge, she said, a focus for Brittany's energy and a distraction from her grief.

After a month or so, Brittany began speaking again and gradually became more outgoing, while retaining her dedication to schoolwork and willingness to devote long hours to getting assignments right, even when it meant starting over from the beginning.

Nedra Massenburg, the school's assistant principal, said that by her senior year Brittany was often in school an hour or more before her first class.

"I take attendance every morning for all our students, and Brittany is often the student who has to come downstairs to remind me that she's here, because she's usually here before I get to school," Massenburg said.

Brittany describes her approach to the charter school's heavy workload and long days as pragmatic.

"I tell all my friends there at Match…you're in school for 10, 12 hours a day, you just might as well just do the work," she said. "We're not leaving anytime soon. We're not going anywhere."

That admonishment shows how she learned to use her natural charisma to help other students, according to Eddie Jou, Brittany's teacher for three math courses.

"I could even confide in her that certain students were not doing their homework, and I wanted her to help push them to do that," he said. "They may not have always done it, but she certainly pushed them."

In the fall, Brittany will begin studies at UMass Amherst, where she plans to major in chemistry as preparation to study medicine, an interest she discovered over two summer internships at Boston Children's Hospital.

She admitted having a moment of trepidation about moving from a small high school to a university campus with thousands of students, but said the feeling was fleeting.

"I'm a social butterfly; I'll get through it," she said. "Sit next to somebody, make new friends every class."