

Hardin Northern community comes together to support senior student

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New life

Hannah Leichner had just turned 18 last month when her world was tragically changed with the death of her parents in a murder-suicide. In the past two weeks, Hannah has been surrounded by friends and community for support emotionally and financially. The faculty and staff at Hardin Northern have raised \$12,000 to assist her with her new life.

Times photo/Dan Robinson

By DAN ROBINSON
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DUNKIRK — A month ago, Hannah Leichner was facing the same challenges most high school seniors experience. She was taking classes at Hardin Northern online and earning college credit by taking courses from the University of Findlay, Clark State and Franklin University. She planned to use her love of animals in selecting a career as a veterinarian.

But her youthful plans were replaced with adult tragedy two weeks ago when her father killed her mother and ended his own life. Fortunately, Hannah had the support of her mother's close friend and the backing of the Hardin Northern community to help her keep her dreams alive.

Hannah lived with her father, Josh Leichner and her mom, Catrisha "Cat" Larson, in Dunkirk. There were many fond memories, she said, but there were also nightmares. Too often, she said, her dad got intoxicated and became violent. He would threaten to kill Cat and burn their house down. "There was a lot of tension in the household in general," said Hannah. "It wasn't always chaos, but there was always the fear of chaos. Mom and I were worrying what would happen next." Josh had begun taking medication to control his drinking problem, Hannah recalled, but in recent weeks had turned again to alcohol.

On Sept. 16, he and Cat got into a fight, which escalated into the next morning. Hannah said her father got even more aggressive than normal and blasted music loudly all night. The situation grew worse in the morning and Cat called the sheriff's office for help. It was not unusual for officers to come to the home to protect Cat and Hannah. "The deputies knew us by name," said Hannah. This time, Josh left the house before the officers arrived. Deputies looked for him throughout the community but couldn't locate him. His anger was worse than ever, Hannah said, and she hid the guns in the home while her dad was gone.

As soon as the deputies were gone, Hannah said her dad returned through the back door. Cat gave Hannah her phone and told her to call the sheriff's office again. She met Josh in the doorway, she said, and he pushed her out of the way. As she called for help, Hannah

heard five to seven shots from inside the house. She's not sure where Josh had kept the gun he used to kill Cat and himself.

Hannah stayed at a neighbor's house as she waited for the deputies to arrive and called her mom's close friend, Julie Gray. She left a message for Julie that she needed her. From her home in Leipsic, Julie was waking up to celebrate her birthday when she found Hannah's message. She had met Cat when the two worked at Wilson Sporting Goods in Ada. Cat shared with Julie the concerns she had about Josh's temper and drinking problems and her fear what would happen to Hannah if Cat was not there to look out for her. "I love her and she will be taken care of," Julie told Cat. "It was a promise I gave her." Julie vowed to her friend if things got to that point, she would care for Hannah, never thinking that might become a reality. The two women each found other jobs but kept in touch. Calling Julie for help seemed the natural thing to do, said Hannah. Julie tried to call Hannah back about 30 times, she said, but there was no answer. By that time, said Hannah, deputies had taken her mom's phone for evidence.

Anxious about the situation, Julie drove from Leipsic to her friend's home in Dunkirk to find the house blocked off with evidence tape and deputies in the front yard. "I fell to the ground, crying. I put it together pretty quickly what had happened," said Julie. Family members and school offered to find a new home for Hannah, but she returned with Julie to Leipsic. "Julie says I am her birthday present," said Hannah with a smile.

She remains a student at Hardin Northern and takes online classes from her new home. She brought with her a cockatoo, an African Gray bird and two cats. The four dogs were given to friends, as were three other birds. "The cats help me cope," said Hannah. "We wanted to make sure Hannah didn't lose everything that day," said Julie.

Hannah has decided to allow the house to be returned back to the Habitat for Humanity people who built it. Her mother's funeral expenses have been paid by her co-workers at Cooper Tire in Findlay. Her father's family has paid for his services, she said. "I don't want to have anything to do with him right now," she said of her father.

There are attorney fees and other expenses facing the 18-year-old Hannah. A Go Fund Me account was established by the faculty and staff at Hardin Northern. Information about how to donate to the Go Fund Me for Hannah is available on the Hardin Northern Facebook page. HN representatives also are opening a separate local account for her and donations may be dropped off at the school with checks made out to Hardin Northern, or sent to her personally at 634 E. Main St., Leipsic, Ohio, 45856. A chili cookoff to raise funds for Hannah is planned at Shenanigan's in Dunkirk on Oct. 25.

"Hannah is an only child and now she finds herself on her own," said HN guidance counselor Andy Wilson. "She is a smart girl and she could use some help preparing for school and other expenses." To date, the two HN funds have brought in \$12,000 for Hannah, "That's a wonderful start, but she still has major expenses to take care of," said Wilson. The family had some financial issues, said Julie, and there is also the cost of college next fall at the University of Findlay. "We will help anyway we can," she said. "God has a plan for Hannah and we want her to follow her dreams. She's got some big ones."