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Fulfilling mom's wish, against the odds

MARK PRICE, *The Charlotte Observer*

If there ever was a kid who had reasons to quit school, it's Patrick Pope.

In the seventh grade, he came home and learned his mother was found dead in what would later be proven a homicide. The turmoil worsened a year later, when his father became unable to work full time due to advanced rheumatoid arthritis. Then, in February, Patrick's stepmother died of a brain aneurysm.

So here he is at age 18, holding down a part-time job, helping out a disabled father with upkeep on the house, and caring for a 4-year-old half brother.

Patrick is still in school, too, at West Mecklenburg High, but not for long. In the next 10 days, he'll be one of 6,500 students graduating from Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools.

There will be those who see it as a triumph that he made it this far, but not Patrick.

When he collects his diploma on June 11, it will be as a student selected for the National Honor Society, with a 3.41 grade-point average and a ranking in the top 13 percent of his class.

He's fulfilling a dream.

'Not afraid to be a good kid'

It could be tougher. Some CMS students don't have even one parent. Others have no home of their own, and still others are raising one or more babies. Compared with all of them, Patrick Pope is lucky. He's single, childless, drug-free, healthy and actually *likes* math, which puts him ahead of most Americans.

Teachers note that he's perpetually upbeat and always polite, saying "yes ma'am," "no sir," and "thank you" when it's called for.

And he's not above hugging them, even if it isn't exactly cool.

"He's not driven by peer pressure and the kids admire him for it," says teacher Tracy Forst, who has known Patrick three years.

"We have students who shy away from good grades ... and being a role model. They lean toward the negative, because they don't want to be perceived as a geek or nerd in front of their peers. Patrick is not afraid to be a good kid."

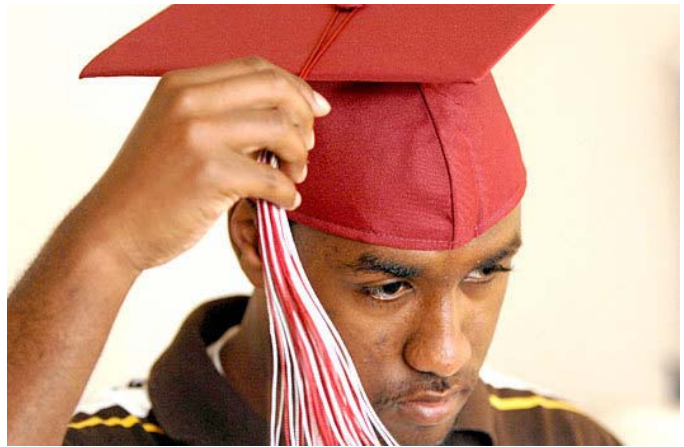
Even better, she says, he always turns in homework on time.

A mother's inspiration

At a speech contest earlier this year, Patrick described himself as fortunate, then went on to say the greatest of those fortunes was his mother, Linda.

He declined to mention to the crowd that she was killed in 2002 by a homeless man who is now serving time for involuntary manslaughter.

She remains the greatest influence in his life. An N.C. State graduate, she insisted that her son be a college graduate, too, no matter the cost.



Patrick Pope tries on his cap at his west Charlotte home. Patrick will graduate from West Mecklenburg High School.

"In the summers, she would buy these math books for whatever grade I was going to be in next, and teach me the math a year in advance," Patrick recalls. "She had me ready before the teachers even got to me."

It was his father, Patrick Pope Sr., who broke the news of her death after Patrick came home from school that day.

"I told him right out there in the front yard," says his father. "He was confused. He was hurt. But he went to that funeral, got in front of the crowd and said, 'I want to tell you about my Mama: The woman who taught me right from wrong. The woman who taught me to do well in school.' It was amazing. He was 14."

On Feb. 9, his father had to break the news again, when his second wife, Maria Pope, 43, died of a brain aneurysm. She is the mother of Patrick's 4-year-old half brother, Spencer.

"Patrick cried a lot, but he saw how hurt I was, and he's more worried about me," says his father. "One day, I was really messed up and he said: 'Daddy, I lost my mama and it hurt me terrible, but when you live life, things change. You have to learn how to live with that and go forward. We need you."

"Here was this 18-year-old boy, telling a 48-year-old man how to deal with death. It blew my mind."

Creating opportunities

It was Patrick who decided to join a dropout prevention program. Dropping out had never entered his mind. However, he wanted to go to college, and that's another of the program's goals.

Andre Reynolds heads the Communities in Schools program at West Meck, and recalls Patrick stood out for being inquisitive and refreshingly polite. Reynolds recommended Patrick for an internship working with children with disabilities.

"He took the opportunity and ran with it," recalls Reynolds. "He met people, made contacts, and that led to a job at Radio Disney."

That was in the 10th grade, and Patrick still works up to 15 hours a week for Radio Disney's promotions department in Charlotte, earning money that pays for clothes and personal needs.

He has proven himself equally skilled at using the school's college incentive program, taking campus tours, learning how to apply and pursuing financial aid.

The payoff came in mid-March, when his father received a call from UNC Charlotte, announcing Patrick had been accepted for the 2007 fall class.

"Patrick heard me hollering and tears came, and he knew what it had to be about, and he started jumping up and down hollering, too," recalls his father. "Then Spencer started jumping up and down, hollering, 'My brother going to college. My brother going to college.' I told Patrick that his mother and stepmother were holding hands in heaven."

Better still is news that financial aid and \$10,000 in scholarship money will cover the four years of tuition.

Fulfilling a mother's dream

Patrick's goal now is a four-year degree in computer information systems, with a minor in business. He has his sights set on a \$70,000-a-year salary, a house with a white picket fence and a grill out back. A wife, kids and a dog are expected as well, but not in the next five years.

Only one thing will be missing on June 12, when he gets his diploma.

His mother.

"She used to say that I was going to graduate and follow in her footsteps," he says. "If I sat with her right now, I'd tell her: 'Mama, everything you envisioned is happening. My future is coming true.'"

It was her dream, he says, and now it's his.

Patrick Pope

Family: Father Patrick Pope Sr., half brothers Kreston Sloan, 34, and Spencer Pope, 4.

Favorite food: Filet mignon and fries.

Relaxes by: Watching old Bugs Bunny and Daffy Duck cartoons.

Worst habit: Procrastinating.

Homework schedule: Averaged studying two hours a night.

Household chores: Taking out the trash, vacuuming, washing the dishes, and cleaning the bathroom, which is his least favorite chore.

Biggest splurge: He bought a \$175 pair of tennis shoes after the store took \$75 off the price.

His father's influence: Patrick Pope Sr. was also driven to see his son graduate from college, so he paid \$200 a month for Patrick to have tutors in the second and third grades. "Somebody told me I could have bought another car for what I paid tutors, but his education was more important than anything I could want in my life."