“You Were Well Loved”

In the four years since the murder of a student, friends and family remember the adventurous spirit and joy of a young man and share how they are healing.

A small crowd gathered on the grassy Sherman Circle in the Petworth neighborhood of northwest Washington, D.C., on Nov. 8. They had come to plant a flowering crabapple tree. Among the group was a mother, several Catholic University alumni, a priest, a D.C. homicide detective, a federal prosecutor, and the mayor-elect of the nation’s capital.

It was a bittersweet day as they shared memories and stories of a young man who was as if the day was glowing; it was golden,” said Heidi Godleski, B.A. 1965, who came from her home in Norwalk, Conn., to honor her late son, Neil. “I looked around and I said to myself, ‘You were well loved, Neil.’”

“I thought back to the darkness and sadness of that night more than four years ago as I stood in the circle again,” said Father Jude. “This time, there was a sense of breathing new life into a place where death had occurred. Planting that tree was part of the healing process.”

Neil’s classmates Jason Nuzzo, B.A. 1999, and John Falcicchio, B.A. 2001, helped organize the tree planting, working with the National Park Service, city government, and Casey Trees to provide a tree that would thrive in that location.

“The tree and the new lights would have been in Neil’s view as he rode his bike home that August night,” said Falcicchio, who has since returned to the tree for reflection. “There is a lot of symbolism there, but it really does feel like we are keeping his spirit lit.”

Neil’s mom’s alma mater. He liked the campus, wrestling champion. He was excited to attend Catholic University in 1997 from Norwalk High School in Connecticut, where he was a freshman year. “He was always the most fun guy in the room. He was engaging and daring, and lacked pretension. He was quick to think about it. That’s the thing about Neil: You can’t help but smile when you think about him. We’ll all be in our 80s and we’ll still be telling Neil stories.”

Following his sophomore year, Neil took time off. When he returned, his friends were in their senior year. He lived with them in Curley Court, and when they graduated, he decided to head out into the world with them. He sought new adventures — among them working as a white water rafting guide. But by his late 20s, he realized he wanted a college degree and he wanted it from Catholic University. So he re-enrolled, switching his major from psychology to biology, even though it would require more time and going back to freshman-level basics in some of his courses.

A Senseless Loss

In August 2010, while pursuing his goal of a biology degree, Neil was living in the Petworth neighborhood and working as a waiter at Phillips Seafood restaurant on the southwest waterfront. He was riding his bike home at 12:30 a.m. on Aug. 22 when he approached Sherman Circle in the bicycle lane. A group of teenagers stood on the other side of the street. One of them fired five shots at Neil as he rode past. The shots missed him but, most likely startled, he fell off his bike. While he was down, the 16-year-old gangman approached Neil and shot and killed him at close range. Reportedly, the killer then made off with about $60 in tips that Neil had earned that night.

He made fast friends. “I remember those first few days at Spellman Hall. I was a Puerto Rican kid coming from a mostly black high school in Baltimore. I was nervous, not sure I would fit in,” says Vladimir Estrada, B.B.E. 2001. “Neil was the first one to come up to me. He had kind of a hippie vibe to him. He had long hair and he was so chill. People gravitated to him. Whether you knew Neil for five minutes or five years, you were his friend,” said Estrada, a biomedical engineer with the U.S. Army.

Matthew Quinn, B.A. 2001, M.A. 2013, also has fond memories of meeting Neil freshman year. “He was always the most fun guy in the room. He was engaging and daring, and lacked pretension. He was quick with a joke or a story, and he was nearly always upbeat and positive,” said Quinn. “He was the kind of friend you could want, the kind who makes you feel perfectly at ease with who you are because he wasn’t going to pretend anything.”

Through two years at CUA, Neil’s circle of friends continued to expand. “He was a character. Everything he did was an adventure,” says Estrada, who had “Godleski” tattooed to his left forearm after his friend’s death. One of Estrada’s favorite memories is of Neil streaking through Movies on the Mall.

A Circle of Friends for Life

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funeral of their 31-year-old son, a Mass at St. vigil in Sherman Circle shortly after his murder. Neil (pictured above) was remembered at a community believe this is happening to you,” said Heidi. There was an element of the surreal. You can’t happened. My husband and I were numb. knew immediately something terrible had hard for Neil’s friends to believe what had happened to him when they first received the news of his death. "When the driver did stop, they assessed the driver forgot to apply the brake,” said Quinn. “That was one of the saddest things for us to process. Neil would have stopped for him, he would have cared about him.”

Still in Their Lives In the years since Neil’s murder, his friends and family have struggled through stages of grief. Heidi said talking about Neil and honoring his memory have been the most helpful. And it is sometimes the simplest gestures that make the biggest difference, she said. “We attended a University Mass of Remembrance at CUA in the fall after Neil died. The rugby team came, all wearing black and white, such a sign of respect. Neil played on the rugby team during his earlier years at Catholic. But these students didn’t even know him.” Some of Neil’s J Street friends spent the days after his death going to his home the following week while playing a tournament in New England. They stayed for dinner and listened while the Godleskis told them about their son. But that willingness to listen is not always the norm. “So often, people avoid mentioning him to us or spare our feelings. But it has the opposite effect; it makes us miss him more,” said Heidi. So she has worked to keep his name in the conversation. Through the Division of University Advancement, the Godleskis have established an endowed scholarship. The Neil Godleski Scholarship assists nontraditional students (those older than 22), either first-time or returning students like Neil. There is also a scholarship in Neil’s name at Norwalk High School, where Heidi spent the first 10 years of her career as a Spanish teacher.

Web Extra As we put this issue of the magazine together, we realized we had a similar theme in two stories — the topic of grief. One “Celebrating Junior,” page 14. So we called on two University experts to address the topic of grief. To read an interview with Monsignor Rayburn, director of the Counseling Center, and Father Jude DeAngelo, University chaplain and director of Campus Ministry, visit cua-magazine.cua.edu

Neil’s parents, Dan and Heidi, received his honorary bachelor’s degree at Commencement 2011 from then Dean of Arts and Sciences L.B. Pen.

His high school hosts the annual Neil Godleski Invitational wrestling tournament. “It brings out so many of Neil’s childhood friends and they love to tell stories about him,” said Heidi. “Heidi, who jumps at any opportunity to tell you about a little boy who loved to keep up with his big sister.”

Two years after the murder that grabbed the attention of D.C. media due to its heinousness, the Godleskis’ resolve to honor Neil’s memory was on full display. Every day for three weeks in September 2012, the family sat in D.C. Superior Court for the trial of the teenager accused of murdering Neil. “During those weeks my husband and I liked to stop on campus. We would eat at the student center. It was somehow comforting to be surrounded by young people. We stopped to see Father Jude in Campus Ministry or to see President Garvey in Nugent Hall. And then we would always step in the Basilica to pray.” Heidi says her faith has been essential. “The simple act of prayer has been soothing, and of course knowing that we will be reunited again one day with our son.”

The jury deliberated for three days. The Godleskis left for home before the verdict, too emotionally exhausted to wait it out. The prosecutor called them with the news of a guilty verdict. "There was some closure in knowing there was justice for our son, but it doesn’t fill the hole in our lives,” said Heidi.

Dan, Maria Elena, and Heidi came back to Washington in December for the sentencing and read victim statements before the court and the perpetrator, detailing the toll of their loss. The young man who murdered Neil — a ward of the city’s Department of Youth Rehabilitative Services at the time of the murder — was sentenced to 42 years in prison. “I still think about Neil a lot,” said close friend Matthew Quinn. “I found a way to forgive the individual who took him away, but I still struggle with the hole that’s left in my life from his absence. When my son was born two years after his death, I gave him the middle name of Neil because he is like family to us, and my children will know him through the stories we tell. I try to remember that I need to love my life because Neil loved his so intensely.”

To the tree planting in November, Heidi brought handmade felt cards for those in attendance. They hung the small red birds on the tree and many kept a card to remember their friend. Falcicchio placed his cardinal on the window sill in his office at the John A. Wilson Building (D.C.’s city hall), where he works as chief of staff for Mayor Muriel Bowser. “It is a constant reminder of the good work left to be done in Neil’s name,” said Falcicchio. Nuzzo and his 2-year-old son, Porter, hang the cardinal on their Christmas tree. Porter was born on Aug. 22, 2012, “bringing needed joy to a very sad anniversary,” said Nuzzo.

Father Jude put his cardinal on a shelf in his room where he keeps mementos from Neil. “Neil’s cardinal is a little icon for me — reminding me to pray for all those who have died by senseless violence, and of a mother who chose a creature that can fly to represent her son and his flight to God.”

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