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Wes Leonard's death could have been avoided; his mother now raises money, works to change laws to save others

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Wes Leonard Heart Team making a difference, saving...: Wes Leonard of Fennville died March 3, 2011 of sudden cardiac arrest on the basketball court. Today his mom leads the Heart Team named after him & is making a difference, saving lives, one school at a time with AED's Eric Seals/Detroit Free Press



Wes Leonard Heart Team making a



Fennville and team bond over memories of Wes

By Jeff Seidel
Detroit Free Press Staff Writer

First of two parts | [Part 2](#)

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There are days when Jocelyn Leonard thinks her son Wes is still alive. Maybe he's over at a friend's house. Maybe he's out lifting weights or shooting baskets. One more game, Mom, one more game; and she thinks, for one wonderful moment, that he will be right back.

Wes, give me your dirty clothes. Wes, get ready for school. Wes, what are you doing?

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Jocelyn Leonard's Heart Team

In wake of Wes Leonard tragedy, heartbroken Fennville focused on saving lives



Jocelyn Leonard, the mother of Wes Leonard talks about her effort to get AED's in every school in Michigan through the Wes Leonard Heart Team.



But then she stops herself. Her son has been dead for almost 11 months, and the pain and guilt are overwhelming. She blames herself for not noticing the subtle warning signs that her son was sick. She blames herself for not noticing that a device that could have saved her son -- an Automated External Defibrillator (AED) -- had been removed from the wall outside the Fennville High School gymnasium, where he played his last game. "I think I have double guilt in this," she says.

So she tries to stay busy, she needs to stay busy, volunteering to teach CPR classes, even if the emotional drain leaves her in a funk for days; helping to start a foundation to raise money to buy more AEDs, giving them to any school that wants one; lobbying for legislation that would make AEDs mandatory in Michigan high schools, and carrying around a portable AED in her van everywhere she goes, just to be safe.

If she can't save her son, she will save somebody else.

Confusion, mistakes

The scene was replayed so many times on national television that it is burned into memory: Wes Leonard, the star high school basketball player, was lifted into the air by his teammates after making a game-winning shot to give Fennville an undefeated season. But suddenly, Wes slipped out of their arms and suffered cardiac arrest.

But here is the part that has been lost: At first, nobody realized what was happening, and there were a series of mistakes.

"Everybody thought he was dehydrated or overheated," said Fennville Superintendent Dirk Weeldreyer.

Somebody went to get ice and cold cloths.

Wes gasped for air, which some thought was a good sign. But that is actually a warning sign, commonly seen in cardiac arrest. "That led to the confusion," Weeldreyer said. "People didn't recognize what was happening." Jocelyn screamed for the AED that she thought was on the wall. "I yelled for



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Jocelyn Leonard has turned into a passionate activist after her son Wes Leonard went into cardiac arrest and died after Fennville High School's big game last year. / ERIC SEALS/Detroit Free Press



Shortly before he collapsed, Wes, 16, made the game-winning shot. / D.J. GEPPERT/Associated Press

it because that's what you are trained to do," she says.

Jocelyn was trained in CPR. She had taught choir for six years at Fennville High in the music room across the hall from the gym. Day after day, year after year, she walked down the hallway past an AED fixed to the wall. She never noticed that it had been taken down.

"For every minute that the heart is stopped, it's 10% less likely that you will get the heart restarted," Jocelyn says. "So after 10 minutes, you don't have much of a chance."

Fennville principal Amber Lugten found the machine in a storage room and brought it out for Wes, 16. But the battery was dead. Ten minutes passed, and any hope of saving him was gone. Big Wes, the handsome, small-town hero, was dead.

"You are mad," Jocelyn Leonard says.

"There is no one to blame. I've never blamed anyone. I'm just so sad about it. I'm sad that it's a \$1,500 fix."

Lugten said the AED was taken down because kids would open the case as a prank, which caused a loud, distracting alarm. "We made a very poor decision to take it down," she said.

There was a working AED in a nearby building, but nobody thought to get it. "It probably would have taken three or four minutes to run there and get it," Weeldreyer said. "That's why we are trying to teach everybody these warning signs."

Searching for stories

The first few days were a blur. Jocelyn Leonard was numb with shock and grief as she planned the funeral. "I've sung at a lot of funerals," Jocelyn says. "I've planned a lot of things for a lot of people. And I wanted it to be special."

This was her last chance to honor her child. "I wanted to show them how great he was," she says.

Close friends and relatives put up a cocoon around the Leonards, as the national news media descended on Fennville, a one-high-school town with a population of about 1,400. ESPN was running hourly reports about the tragedy. But Jocelyn had no idea.

After taking a month off from teaching, Jocelyn returned to the classroom in April. "I came back for totally selfish reasons," she said. "I wanted to be here to hear stories about my son before

those seniors graduated. I knew that if I was here and sat in lunch with them, that they would tell me stories. I treasure those stories."

Wes was a daredevil. He used to ride snowmobiles 110 m.p.h. or jump into a pond and catch snakes and let them bite him. He'd pick up snapping turtles, narrowly avoiding injury. "That's who he was," Jocelyn Leonard says. "He was going to be the next Crocodile Hunter, the next Steve Irwin."

Wes had a few symptoms of heart disease, but they were subtle. "He was dizzy once," Jocelyn says, "when he got off the couch and I said, 'I think you have been texting too long. I think that tells me you need to quit texting. Your eyes are down too long and you need to go eat a banana. Just make sure your potassium is good.'"

"I didn't take him to the cardiologist. One of the signs is dizziness. I didn't know that."

Two weeks before he died, Wes took a nap on a Sunday, which was unusual. "Being tired is a warning sign," she says. "But who is not tired in the middle of an undefeated season? You are 16-0 at that point. That was my warning. That's all. That's it."

The autopsy report

Eleven weeks after Wes died, Jocelyn Leonard received the autopsy report, which revealed that her son had cardiomyopathy. The results were reviewed by several experts, and Jocelyn Leonard was told that both of his ventricles were damaged and his heart had turned fatty.

"They said that is unheard of, that your heart could survive that long and be damaged like that," she says. "My son had an enlarged heart, and he did the worst thing he could have done: He was a super athlete. ... If he had extra time, he did more push-ups and sit-ups. It's the worst thing you can do for a heart that is enlarged, to give it more physical activity."

Jocelyn was told that his heart could have been started again with a jolt from an AED. She tries to imagine how everything would have changed, if Wes had been saved. He probably would have needed a heart transplant and his athletic career would have been uncertain.

"He would have had to adjust," she says. "But he had so many other talents. He was an incredible artist."

Jocelyn Leonard said that her son's heart condition was genetic. But her only other child, Mitchell, a freshman at Fennville, does not show any signs of the disease. Mitchell is checked by a cardiologist every three months. "We know he's really healthy," Jocelyn says. "He's in the greatest position that we can have him in."

A passionate activist

Jocelyn has turned into a driven, passionate activist, able to spout statistics off the tip of her tongue: "For every 300 kids who walk into

a high school, one of them has an enlarged heart. The leading killer of high school athletes is cardiac arrest. I did not know that."

Jocelyn Leonard and her husband, Gary Leonard, who declined to be interviewed for this story, have started the Wes Leonard Heart Team, a nonprofit organization.

"Why didn't anyone save my son?" Jocelyn Leonard asks. "Why didn't anyone do this for my kid?"

The heart team has given away 20 AEDs and is lobbying for legislation that would require every high school in Michigan to have an AED. "You have to legislate it," she says.

Since June 1, certified trainers from the Wes Leonard Heart Team have taught CPR and AED skills to 180 people.

Jocelyn Leonard has no medical background, but she went through training and is now one of the team's certified trainers. Sometimes, Jocelyn works with Maria Flores, another member of the heart team whose son was close to Wes.

"I'll break down and cry," Flores says, "and I'll say, 'Jocelyn you have to help me through this.' And then it clicks. My gosh. That's his mother. What am I doing to her? I'm the one asking for help, crying."

'He is remembered'

Jocelyn Leonard totes around a portable AED in her van and brings it into the house at night. "You might be somewhere in the country where there is a slow response time," she says. "You might as well bring it. We don't make a big deal about it."

If Mitchell sleeps over at a friend's house, she'll slip it into a bag. "He understands," Jocelyn Leonard says. "It might not be for you. It may be for the grandpa who is visiting for the birthday party. It probably won't be for you. We have it. It might as well go."

Mitchell has grown 4 inches since his brother died, and he made the varsity basketball team at Fennville.

"Every day, I walk around and see 'Never Forgotten,' " Mitchell says of the shirts that honor his brother. "I think it makes it easier. A lot of people ask if it makes it harder, seeing his name, but it lets me know he is remembered."

This was the year that Wes and Mitchell were supposed to be on varsity together. The senior and the freshman. But now, Jocelyn and Gary have to go into that gym, trying to cheer for one son while aching for the other.

On game day, Jocelyn wears buttons pinned to her shirt with pictures of both her sons. "Mitchell is seventh man now," Jocelyn Leonard says. "He would have been eighth. He would have seen time."

But she won't let him play unless there is an AED on the bench. "It's a prerequisite for me," Jocelyn Leonard says. "Mitchell will never play on a field or court unless there is one right there."

Glimpses of her son

Jocelyn Leonard had her whole life planned out, and it revolved around her kids. She planned to visit at least eight colleges with Wes this year, which would have been his senior year. "I really think he would have been a Division I football player," she says. "That was his passion. He has played with broken elbows and arms ripped out. And they almost won."

She smiles, full of pride, like it happened yesterday.

She sees her son's presence in the strangest of places.

When Mitchell was about to play his first varsity basketball game, Jocelyn was worried. She hopped into her van and glanced at the thermometer. It read 35 degrees. "That was Wes' number," she says.

After school, she got into the van again and it was still 35 degrees. "We are doing the right thing, right Wes?" she asked.

She got into the van to go to the game and there was the answer. The temperature was still 35 degrees. And she thought: "All right. He's supposed to play."

On the court again

Mitchell Leonard sits on the bench, as the announcer introduces the starting lineup before Fennville plays Saugatuck in early January.

Mitchell is the last one announced, just like Wes used to be the last player out of the locker room.

The meeting between the two rival teams is being called a "Red Out" basketball game, and all the proceeds are going to the Wes Leonard Heart Team. Hundreds of people in the crowd are wearing Wes Leonard shirts.

"It was kind of emotional," Mitchell says. "I'm really happy to play basketball against our rival. At the same time, I'm seeing my brother's shirts everywhere. It was bringing back everything."

Early in the game, Mitchell sprints down the court and banks a 3-pointer and the crowd erupts. "My hairs were sticking up," Mitchell says. "I was pretty freaked out."

Mitchell plays until he becomes exhausted and starts to suck air, getting chills to be "playing with the big boys," just being out there with his brother's teammates, the guys who treat him like a brother.

And his parents look down from the stands, and the fans in the crowd cheer with tears in their eyes -- another Leonard playing in the same gym where this tragedy began, and outside the gym, on

the wall, there is a brand new AED, and inside the gymnasium, on the Fennville bench, out of sight, but within reach, there is another one, a portable defibrillator in a yellow case.

Contact Jeff Seidel: 313-223-4558 or jseidel@freepress.com

More Details: The Heart Team

The Wes Leonard Heart Team is trying to raise money to buy Automated External Defibrillators to give to any school that wants one.

The group, a nonprofit based in Fennville, accepts donations and sells merchandise at www.wesleonardheartteam.org.

For more information, call 269-455-0401.

In addition, the Wes Leonard Heart Team has joined forces with Kimberly's Gift, a nonprofit based in Troy, because both organizations have similar goals. The Troy organization was formed after the death of Kimberly A. Gillary, who died in 2000 while playing water polo for Troy Athens High School. For more information, call 248-528-0440 or go to www.kimberlys.gift.org.

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