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

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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

Last of 2 parts | [Part 1](#)

Six-year-old Nathan Griffin watched his favorite player die.

Nathan was in the bleachers at Fennville High School on March 3 when Wes Leonard collapsed and died of cardiac arrest.

Ten months later, Nathan doesn't like to be alone and has a hard time sleeping in his own bed. For Christmas, Nathan asked Santa

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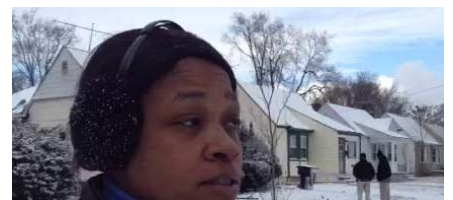
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Jocelyn Leonard, the mother of Wes Leonard talks about her effort to get AED's in every school in Michigan through the Wes Leonard Heart Team.



Fennville High students wear "Never Forgotten" T-shirts in honor of Wes Leonard, the star basketball player who died last year. / Jan. 6 photo by Eric Seals/Detroit Free Press

for money to donate to the Wes Leonard Heart Team, a nonprofit organization started by Wes' parents, Jocelyn and Gary Leonard.

On a warm January night in Fennville, Nathan stood in a hallway at the high school and handed an envelope to Jocelyn Leonard.

She read the letter to Santa and pulled out a \$100 bill for the heart team. Half the money came from Nathan and the other half from his older brother Braden Griffin, 11.

"I think you wrote this, didn't you?" Jocelyn Leonard said to Nathan. "That is so nice of you. I think that deserves a hug."

She bent down and wrapped her arms around Nathan.

"I'm helping people save other kids who had what Wes had," Nathan said.

On the surface, Fennville has returned to normal. Ten months ago, it seemed as if every store in town displayed a sign or poster that honored Wes. Many included 35 - his basketball number -- but those signs and posters are gone now. Still, that number has grown to represent something larger to his friends and family, to little kids who didn't even know him that well.

"Yes, the signs are down now," said Maria Flores, who is on the heart team. "But I don't think the community will ever forget Wes. Like everybody says, coming into Fennville, the speed limit changes to 35. That was Wes' basketball number. Everybody will always remember that. You have to slow your speed down to 35, and there is Wes."

He is still there -- in that letter to Santa, and in the eyes of his grieving coach, and in a room stocked with Wes Leonard T-shirts, and in a sunset that changed a life.

### 'It's ... changed me'

Fennville basketball coach Ryan Klingler walks around feeling physical pain. Like somebody dug into his body and ripped out a chunk of his heart. He was extremely close to Wes, his star player.



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"To tell you the truth, I don't know if I ever did crash," said Klingler, 34. "I'm not sure if it's ended yet, or if it has sunk in, or if I've dealt with some of it."

Klingler was the public face of the tragedy, holding the team together after Wes died. The story became national news, and Klingler was the one who was seen, day after day, on ESPN, handling most of the media interviews and post-game news conferences.

But this year, Klingler doesn't get nervous before games, and the wins and losses don't seem to matter as much. "It's definitely changed me as a person," he said.

The loss of Wes has changed the way Klingler coaches. He has become more cautious.

"If a kid doesn't feel well, I need them to sit out," he said. "If you feel like something is wrong, take a break. That's definitely changed. I think it's really important that coaches really listen to the kids."

Last year, the basketball team's focus was to be "uncommon."

This year, Fennville's focus is to have fun. "We are big on having fun and enjoying," Klingler said. "High school athletics is one of the greatest things a kid can experience. A lot of our guys need to know that they can enjoy it and have fun. I love to see smiles on kids' faces. I hate when they get down."

The tragedy has pulled together the Leonard family and the coach.

Jocelyn Leonard considers Klingler -- Coach K, as she calls him -- her third son. She worries about him, making him supper if he hasn't eaten, even if she puts it in a to-go box.

Klingler calls the Leonard family "one of the most unique and caring families that I've gotten to know in my 20 years around athletics. They are amazing. They truly care about people."

### **'Wes was first class'**

Flores' son, Xavier Grigg, was one of Wes' best friends.

"He'd come and drink all my chocolate milk," Flores said. "He'd eat all the cereal and snacks. I don't know. I miss him. It's a terrible loss."

Flores was hit by a drunken driver in 2010. Her neck was broken and she had three surgeries. "I'd lay in bed and think, 'What am I going to do with myself?'"

"I can't work. I'm in pain. I remember thinking, 'I'm going to hurt for the rest of my life.' "

Jocelyn Leonard asked Flores to join the heart team because she was so close to Wes.

Flores says the experience has changed her profoundly. Being on the heart team has given her a purpose. She says she feels as if life is worth living and she is doing something to be proud of.

"I'm going to have pain no matter what I do," Flores said. "I might as well get out of that bed and do something with my time. That's where I get my drive."

Flores is still recovering, still in constant pain. "It's usually a six on a scale of one to 10," she said. "It's worse at night."

A room in her house has been turned into something that could be called the Wes Leonard Heart Team store. It's filled with merchandise, including Wes Leonard T-shirts, sweatshirts, two different types of hats, coffee mugs, baby clothes, key chains, wristbands, water bottles and lanyards.

Flores takes orders online -- "cash, checks or credit card," she said -- and then she mails everything out. She urged a reporter to come to her house. "We want to be transparent with everything," she said. "All of the money goes to buying AEDs" -- automated external defibrillators.

The walls of the room are decorated with several pictures of Wes.

"Wes was first class," she said. "He did everything the right way. So that's why this has to be first class."

From time to time, Flores goes to the cemetery, on the edge of town, where Wes is buried.

"You'd be amazed at the things dropped off there -- basketballs and footballs," she said. "Kids sign them and leave them. Notes. Flowers. There is just tons of stuff."

She goes and cleans up the area. To make sure it stays first class.

### **'We are now closer'**

Tobias Hutchins, who calls himself "the weird awkward kid who doesn't play football or basketball, but is friends with the guys on the team," was in the student section when Wes died.

"That night was a huge event, like Super Bowl weekend," said Hutchins, 19, now a freshman at Grand Valley State University. "Everybody was going to the game. ... Just about the entire community was there."

The day after Wes died, about 50 classmates showed up at Hutchins' house, and they grieved together. "We all had to cope together," he said. "We just sat there and watched the footage."

Hutchins used to sit with Wes at lunch almost every day with a group of friends. Then again, Wes sat with just about everybody. He would bounce from table to table, and talk and talk, so genuine with everybody, never acting better than anybody.

Hutchins said the tragedy brought his classmates together, as well as the entire community. Hundreds went to the visitation and the funeral.

"We were always a close community, but we are now closer," he said. "We all knew Wes somewhat personally. It gives us a purpose to tell people why Wes was special and what he stood for. That's a powerful thing for a community."

Hutchins is studying music education, economics and political science, and he wants to go into politics.

"I believe so much in community now," Hutchins said. "The power of people is incredible. It's changed my philosophy. I want to go into politics to articulate that the power of the people can pull you through anything."

Hutchins, who was last year's senior class president at Fennville, was asked to join the heart team after he graduated. He updates the website and handles the social media.

After Fennville was knocked out of the state tournament, Hutchins was driving a 1998 Oldsmobile Regency back to Fennville with a carload of friends when he saw something that changed his life.

"The sky was the most unbelievable, gorgeous, glorious thing you've ever seen in your life," Hutchins said. "Right then, I knew Wes was up there. There were all these cars in a line heading back to Fennville. And right then, I knew everything was going to be all right. It was peaceful."

The moment awoke a spirituality in Hutchins that he had never experienced.

"Now," he said, "I definitely believe."

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### **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 [wesleonardheartteam.org](http://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 Kimberly A. Gillary died in 2000 while playing water polo for Troy Athens High School. For more information, call 248-528-0440 or go to [kimberlysgift.org](http://kimberlysgift.org).

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