



A Profile in Courage and Compassion

A horrific collision involving the high-school wrestling team reveals the true character of a small town in Iowa.

STAN FRIEDMAN

I'll always remember where I was on 9/11, I'll always remember where I was when Kennedy was shot. I'll always remember where I was when the Challenger exploded. And I'll always remember where I was on November 8, 2008," says Richard Moore, pastor of the Evangelical Covenant Church in Sloan, Iowa.

That was the cool, crisp Saturday morning when five Sloan athletes were riding in a Chevy Suburban driven by their Westwood High School wrestling coach, Dan Thompson, to a clinic twenty-five miles away in Mapleton. They never made it.

Seven miles outside of Sloan, the driver of a minivan inexplicably crossed the center line of a two-lane highway and slammed into the Suburban. It was a day that changed some of the families forever—and a day that reminded the residents of Sloan what kind of community they lived in.

Sloan is one of those towns you drive by on your way to someplace else. Eight blocks long and eight blocks wide, it's a place you might notice out the window of your car and wonder if anything ever happens there. Residents live in modest, one-story wood-framed houses. They farm or work twenty-five miles north in Sioux City.

The local K-12 school has roughly 650 students, 300 of whom attend the high school. The area is dotted with towns of similar sizes, and everyone knows just about everyone else.

Emergency personnel from nearby Hornick were the first to arrive at the accident site. The front end of the three-ton Suburban was crushed to the windshield. The driver of the minivan died instantly. The rescue crew expected to find more dead inside the Suburban.

The collision had thrown eighteen-year-old senior Jordan Mitchell from the vehicle. When paramedics arrived, he was wandering around the scene, disoriented and unaware that he had fractured his back. Four wrestlers and their coach were still trapped in the Suburban. Among the victims were best friends Trent Baker and Blake Jorgensen, both attenders of Moore's congregation of forty.

Only a half hour earlier, Trent's father, Keith, had taken some extra clothing to the school to help his son sweat off some weight. "I knew he would be sitting in the front seat next to Coach Thompson," he says. "Trent has really looked up to him." At the accident scene when a rescue worker looked inside the Suburban, he saw the boy's body crushed into a space only eighteen inches wide. He moved on to help the living.

Crews extricated the other three wrestlers and their coach. The most critically injured—sixteen-year-old Adam Greeno, who suffered a head wound, and fifteen-year-old Blake—were placed on a helicopter to be transported to Mercy Medical Center in Sioux City.

As the helicopter was about to take off, someone discovered that Trent was still alive. The compression from the crushed Suburban on his body had stanching the internal hemorrhaging. But when he was pried from the vehicle, his condition worsened quickly. Blake was taken off the helicopter and Trent given his place.

Blake, Jordan, and the fifth victim, Sage Washburn, were taken by ambulance to Mercy Medical Center, twenty-five minutes away. By the time the parents arrived at 10:30 a.m., dozens of teenagers from Sloan were already there. Within hours, hundreds of people filled the waiting room and overflowed to other areas of the hospital.

Medical personnel and surgeons worked throughout the day to save

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Trent, Blake, and Adam. Early on, physicians told the Jorgensens that Blake had broken his C6 and C7 vertebrae. If their son survived he would be paralyzed from the chest down.

Meanwhile, Trent was bleeding at a furious rate and required multiple pints of blood. The impact had shattered his right leg from the knee to the ankle, broken his ankle and foot, ruptured his spleen, and lacerated his liver. Surgeons removed his spleen, and used special coils placed in blood vessels to finally stop the bleeding in his liver. They finished operating about 5:30 p.m. In another operation days later, surgeons placed rods in his leg.

While hospital personnel were treating the victims, the community implemented an ad hoc disaster plan. A prayer meeting was quickly organized, and that night 400 people dealing with their own grief and shock crowded into the high-school auditorium. Outside the service, Moore heard residents making plans to construct accessibility ramps at Trent's and Blake's houses. "It was amazing," he says. "Within six hours, people were already looking that far ahead."

After the vigil, most participants

returned to the hospital. The school superintendent packed his car with blankets as well as pillows he purchased from a nearby store. He delivered them to the hospital because he knew none of the boys' friends was going to leave that night. "There were kids camping everywhere," says Don Jorgensen, Blake's father.

In the days that followed, area residents, especially students, gathered at the hospital. Moore recalls, "School

would get out at 3:25. Then the kids would go straight to their cars. At 3:31 the interstate was packed—there would be a convoy." Community members regularly brought meals for the people who stayed at the hospital to encourage the families.

"We couldn't believe how much support there was. There were people there all the time," says Blake's mother, Jamie Jorgensen, sounding a bit embarrassed. She was emphatic, however, "I don't know how we would have made it without them."

The community showed its support in other ways as well. Fifteen hundred people showed up to a pancake breakfast one week after the accident to raise funds for the families. A group of high-school girls made a poster declaring, "We're all in this together." It became the town's rallying cry.

T-shirts and rubber bracelets bearing those words were sold, not only in Sloan, but in neighboring schools and communities as well, to raise money for the families. At one wrestling meet, the opposing coach wore one of the shirts, which drew thunderous applause from the spectators. A few months later, when the youth group from Sloan attended CHIC at the Uni-

Stan Friedman is the news editor for the Department of Communication.

versity of Tennessee—without Trent or Blake—they hung a banner at the Thompson-Boling arena to let everyone know, “We’re all in this together.”

All of the victims except Trent and Blake were discharged from the hospital within a week. Trent was released after three weeks—the last to leave. During the initial two weeks, he was either unconscious or heavily sedated. “The first thing I remember is trying to get up and falling halfway out of bed,” he says.

Around the time Trent was discharged, Blake was flown to Craig Hospital in Denver, one of the nation’s premier rehabilitation facilities known for its research on patients with spinal cord and traumatic brain injuries. The ambulance that transported Blake to the twin-engine prop airplane drove past six school buses along the tarmac filled with students and other area residents. They cheered and waved handwritten signs showing their support. “It was cool having everybody there, but it also was kind of embarrassing,” he says.

The community already was planning for his return and developing bigger ideas than a ramp to the door of the Jorgensen home. They knew the split-level house would never accommodate Blake’s needs. None of the interior doors was wider than thirty inches, and the bedroom and bathrooms were not wheelchair accessible.

Don Jorgensen felt overwhelmed by Blake’s needs and by how dependent his son would be on other people. He, too, recognized that his house would not allow Blake any independence.

Two weeks after arriving in Denver, he expressed his fears through a blog on the Caring Bridge website, which allows family and friends to stay connected during a health crisis. “Tonight, I feel lost. I don’t know what to do or where to begin,” he wrote. He was unaware of the plans being formed in Sloan.

Residents discussed several options



Three weeks before the accident Trent Baker (standing, left) and Blake Jorgensen (#1, right) played one of their last football games together.

before a proposal materialized. Ultimately, a local contractor, together with Chad Shook, a family friend, and Todd Greder, the high school’s athletic director, called a town meeting on January 14 to launch the “Build a House for Blake” project. Although temperatures plunged below zero that night, several hundred people from the area attended.

The Jorgensens were still in Denver when they received the phone call telling them of the project. Later, Don would write on Caring Bridge, “Often I think to myself, ‘Once I get back, am I capable of living my life in such a way that deserves this outpouring of love?’”

Organizers proceeded to post a “Build a House for Blake” Facebook page and held numerous fundraisers throughout the year. Events included basketball games, concerts, hotdog-eating contests, and even a wheelchair basketball tournament in which celebrities and members of the community took on one of the participating teams. Still recovering from their own injuries, Trent and Jordan were part of the celebrity team that also included several TV reporters.

More than thirty organizations and businesses participated in the fundraisers, and almost 100 sponsors and donors contributed building supplies

and appliances. On March 2, within seven weeks of the town meeting, workers broke ground on property that had been donated for the house.

In addition to raising \$100,000 for the house, the community held fundraisers to assist all the families with medical expenses. The Sloan Covenant Church established a crisis fund that eventually distributed nearly \$20,000 in addition to the money donated to the house project.

While the community was constructing a house for Blake, the two friends were beginning to rebuild their lives in separate cities. They encouraged one another and shared the latest news via Skype. Although he still was in extreme pain and couldn’t bend his leg, Trent convinced his parents to drive him eight hours to Denver for a Christmas visit with Blake.

The two boys had been friends since they wrestled against each other in first grade. They had played on the same or opposite teams in just about every sport during every year since. As their friendship grew, the families developed equally strong bonds. The parents talk about each other’s son as if he is their own. Don, a man of imposing size, starts to weep when he talks about the pain Trent had to

undergo during his rehab that continued for more than a year. And Keith Baker, instead of focusing on his own son's struggles, talks about the fortitude Blake has shown.

Both boys were multi-sport athletes, excelling in whatever they played. Both wrestled, and played baseball and football. Blake also ran track, and Trent golfed. Trent is the larger of the two, now 215 lean, solid pounds. Blake is the puckish joker. "You don't want to get into a match of wits with him," says Greder.

Blake's humor never left him. Before the accident, he weighed 170 pounds, and wanted to lose twenty-five so he could wrestle at 145. His father argued that such a goal was impossible. After many weeks on a feeding tube in the hospital, Blake's

Before each match, Trent walked around the mats twice in honor of his two friends.

weight eventually fell below 145. On that day he laughed and said to his dad, "Told you I'd make it!"

Months later, when a television reporter was interviewing Blake outside his house on a chilly night, he quipped, "It's so cold out here I can't feel my legs." The startled journalist had no idea how to respond.

Blake can move his arms but not his fingers or any other part of his lower body. "He never asked, "Why me?" says Don. He did become frustrated, however, when hospital psychologists kept asking about his state of mind. Blake always responded that he was fine. One night, Don told Blake, "If I were in your situation, I'd be upset and probably throwing things." The teenager held up his hands and said, "I can't," and then laughed.

During his three months at Craig Hospital, Blake worked with a hyper-focused intensity. If the staff asked him to do ten repetitions of an exercise, he did fifteen. If they asked him to do twenty, he did twenty-five.

His years of wrestling conditioned him mentally, he says. "If you lose, you can't blame anybody but yourself. You have to have a strong mind to wrestle." If Blake had regrets about the accident, they only appeared when he wondered whether he could have prevented the paralysis by working harder at strengthening his neck.

For months, Trent experienced his own excruciating pain, but the possibility of competing again inspired him. His first attempt to lift weights was discouraging. He tried to bench-press fifty pounds but he had lost too much muscle mass. He had to remove all the weights and lift only the bar.

But within seven months he returned to playing baseball and chalked up a winning record while pitching for the first-place Rebels. He returned to football as well and played multiple positions on offense and defense.

One year after the accident Trent returned to wrestling and qualified for the state championships at 171 pounds. He increased his weight to 215 pounds his senior year and racked up a record of 38-0 during the regular season. He also joined the elite 100-win club—wrestlers who achieve 100 victories in their high-school career. Most wrestlers need four years to reach that mark, but Trent did it in three after the accident had cost him his sophomore season.

He returned to the state championship ranked second in his weight class. Trent told a local newspaper that he used his experiences from the accident to motivate him. "A lot of good

has come from that," he said. "I'm a whole lot stronger than I was. There is a lot of determination and drive, and I think that led me into this season and last season too." Trent lost in the semifinals to another good friend, but took third place, and finished the season 45-1.

Trent now admits a major motivator for him to win was his desire to represent the town that had supported



Trent Baker (right) traveled eight hours to visit Blake Jorgensen in Denver where he spent three months in a rehab hospital. It was the first time the boys were together since the morning of the accident.

him. "I've never seen him make a big deal of it, but you knew that was part of it," Greder says. His parents were concerned, however. "We told him that was too big a burden for him to carry," says his mother, Treasa. He assured them it wasn't.

Trent also wrestled for Blake and Adam, the other Rebel wrestler who had suffered a head injury in the accident and is now unable to participate in any sports. Before each match, Trent walked around the mats twice in honor of his two friends. He then made eye contact with them in the crowd to acknowledge their presence. "I knew they really wanted to be out there," he says.

"He's always made me proud,"

says Keith, choking up, “but as a parent, it was special to me because it wasn’t about him. That’s how you want your kid to be.”

Blake admits that watching others compete was painful initially. “It was hard the first baseball game, it was hard the first basketball game, and it was hard the first football game. You just really want to be out there. You just have to get used to it. I try not to let it bother me. I don’t think I can wonder how it might have been. It’s not good to sit around all sad and depressed.” At first he balked at attending the games, but his father pressed him, telling him he would have to go sometime.

He went all the time. He wore his baseball jersey and sat in the dugout with the rest of the team during the season. He was a captain for the football team, and he made it to wrestling meets.

His track coach encouraged Blake to wheel the 100-meter race alongside the runners at a home meet. Blake struggled as the crowd and the other runners—who completed the race in twelve seconds—cheered him. He crossed the finish line at 1:47.7. “I wasn’t going to stop,” he says. “There were all those people watching.”

The house for Blake and his family was completed in July, and the Jorgensens moved in the same week the youth group was attending CHIC. The community had built a 2,100-square-foot home, not including the basement. It is one of the nicest houses in the area. Greder puts the value of cash donations and volunteer labor at \$250,000. While it is handicapped accessible, the accommodations are discreet. A visitor could walk past the elevator and not notice it. Blake’s bedroom, which is chock-full of University of Iowa posters and paraphernalia, has an adjoining bathroom with a large tiled shower big enough for his wheelchair.

Blake’s return to school was a smooth transition. The straight-A



The community of Sloan joined together to build a new home for Blake that accommodates his wheelchair.

student finished his senior year with a 3.99 grade point average—second in his class. He dismisses the suggestion that the only teacher to give him a B should have granted him a break. “If I didn’t get the points, I don’t deserve the grade,” he says.

When he gave his salutatorian speech at graduation, Blake didn’t mention one word about the accident, the new house, or the obstacles he had to overcome. Instead he talked about the challenges every student experiences, such as bad cafeteria food, as well as the fun he had in high school.

The adults have learned lessons of their own from the students. Don, a high-school English teacher at Westwood, offers a confession about the time Blake schooled him. Blake was filling out college applications, which included an essay portion. He wasn’t sure what to write, so Don told him, “Tell them your sob story.”

Blake’s response was curt. “It’s not a sob story.”

This fall both boys started college. Trent is attending Central College in Pella, Iowa, where he intends to wrestle. He is working toward a degree in special education. Blake is pursuing a journalism degree at the University of Iowa. He wants to become a sports-writer.

Blake has dreamed of attending the university since he was a child. Even after he was accepted into the school, the dream almost didn’t come true. He needs physical assistance in the morning and evening, and despite several months of talking with at least eight organizations that might provide the special care, the Jorgensens were

unable to find any that could supply an aide part-time. Finally in early August they found one, just weeks before classes started.

Challenges remain, however. Their insurance company has refused to cover those expenses. The Jorgensens have filed an appeal with the company, but for now they are paying the full cost, which could be as much as \$100,000 over the four years. The family is determined to do whatever is possible to keep Blake at the university after he worked so hard to get there.

In addition to the assistance the small town has given its own, they have turned to aid other communities as well. Last April a tornado ripped apart Mapleton and destroyed 100 buildings while damaging every other structure in the community of 1,000 people. The next day, Sloan residents arrived early to work alongside families digging through the rubble of what were once their homes. Westwood High School canceled classes so students could volunteer. “I think we just understand tragedy,” says Treasa Baker.

Two and a half years after that horrible day in 2008, area residents still don the “We’re all in it together” bracelets and T-shirts. “Whenever I see a kid wearing that T-shirt, I stop,” says Moore. “It makes me remember. It reminds me to pray.” ■

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