

West Morris and Gill St. Bernard's lacrosse teams come together in display of mutual support

April 12, 2023

When people in Long Valley say that they look out for their own, they really mean it.

And if anyone ever had a doubt, all they had to do was to show up at the West Morris Central High School lacrosse field on the evening of April 4, where a tremendous show of community support was showcased for the opening game of Wolfpack's boys lacrosse season against nearby Gill St. Bernard's.

Gill St. Bernard's coach Byron Collins and his wife, Laura, happened to grow up in town and still make it their home. Their son, Gavin, attends Gill and is the senior captain for the Knights. He learned the game while playing with many of the West Morris players.

The Collins family received devastating news in December, when Laura was diagnosed with an aggressive brain tumor.

As soon as the local community found out, they did all sorts of things to help the Collins family in their time of need.



Gavin Collins (left) of Gill St. Bernard's and Brayden Fuller (right) of West Morris shake hands before the game



It wasn't long after that Long Valley, and in particular its lacrosse family, was hit with another awful blow. In late January, Robert Fuller, the father of West Morris senior captain Brayden Fuller, died suddenly of a heart attack.

Once again, the local community rallied to support a family in need by aiding and comforting the Fullers. And among those leading the effort was Byron Collins and his family, who wanted to pay the love and support which they have received forward.

With the lacrosse season approaching, and with West Morris set to host Gill St. Bernard's in the first game, it was only natural that the local community - lacrosse families and beyond, including the people from Gill St. Bernard's - would come together to make it a special event. The theme for the game was "It's Not Just A Game...It's A Community."

A special \$5 admission donation was accepted and t-shirts were sold. The Collins and Fuller families each picked a charity to benefit from the proceeds, and at halftime, a special surprise saw Byron Collins announce to Brayden Fuller that another share of the proceeds would be used for his book expenses at Bryant University in Rhode Island, where he will continue his lacrosse career next year.

After the game, which West Morris won, 12-5, the teams and their families gathered in the school cafeteria for an informal reception.

It was a night well worthy of recognition as part of the NJSIAA Sportsmanship Series, presented by JAG-ONE Physical Therapy.

"The true winners were the three who we honored today - the charities and the Fuller family," said Byron Collins, who graduated from West Morris in 1988.



Gavin Collins of Gill St. Bernard's and his family

"We're going through a tough time with my family, but when I got the call about the Fullers, right from there, my head started spinning about how we had to help. This community, even though I don't teach or work here, has been behind me. Not only has Gill, but Long Valley. So when that was going on with the Fuller family, I knew I had to help."

The charity selected by the Collins family was the Sarah's Fight for Hope Foundation, a Long Valley-based organization that honors a local girl who died of cancer at age 15 in 2017. It works to enrich the lives of children battling cancer, as well as their families, by providing programs, support and resources.



Brayden Fuller of West Morris and his family

The Fuller family chose the Long Valley First Aid Squad as the recipient of their designated donation. The families were recognized before the game, with each serving as their team representative for the coin toss.

At halftime, the presentations to the two groups were made, after which Byron Collins took the microphone to make a special announcement directed at Brayden Fuller, who he has coached in BBL club program. Another donation was being made - to help cover the cost of Brayden's books in college.

"Looking out for each other was what this was all about," Coach Collins said. "We're going to try to knock the snot out of each other during the game, but before and after, we're teaching the players life lessons through lacrosse to pay things forward. We want them to learn how to help people. That's what Long Valley really has as a community. They've been there for our family, and we want to make sure they are there for the Fuller family as well."

Brayden Fuller is grateful for the support that's been shown toward his family in the wake of losing his dad well into his senior year.

"I could not be happier that people are looking out for me like that," he said. "The community is just amazing, with all of the support from Long Valley and Gill. Lacrosse is a very tight group and their help is amazing. I had no idea that they would do that for me tonight."



Gill St. Bernard's coach Byron Collins embraces West Morris captain Brayden Fuller during a special halftime presentation

Likewise, Gavin Collins appreciates the way how people have rallied around his mom, who was present at the game.

"It's all about getting together as a community," he said. "Once we step on the field we are competing, but afterwards we are friends."

The two players understand how what took place fits into the overall theme of sportsmanship and its importance.

"Sportsmanship is the number one thing I try to strive for," Brayden Fuller said.

"I think sportsmanship means that you and your opponent are both playing the game on the same playing field," said Gavin Collins, who is headed next year to Kenyon College in Ohio. "You are going through the same experiences, so you should not hold things against each other and actually show compassion, since you are both on the same boat."

Those are things that the coaches were hoping to bring home to all of their players, and the mission was clearly accomplished.

"As coaches and competing athletes, we spend so much time preparing and working towards a goal of winning as many games as we can," noted West Morris assistant Barry Buchanan, who also coaches with Byron Collins at the club level. "We measure ourselves as successful mostly based on the outcome of the season. Sometimes it's important to stop and think about all of the other stuff that matters just

as much if not more than the wins and the losses. Unfortunately, sometimes it takes tragic events or terrible news for life to smack you upside the head and remind you of this. The night was more than just a game. It was an opportunity for communities to support one another, for kids and coaches to be part of a great game, not for the result but for the joy of it.

"I was so moved and appreciative of the community response, the action from both lacrosse clubs, the support from both school administrations, and the outstanding media coverage," he said. "Brayden and his family and Laura and Byron and their family are at the heart of this event and in the thoughts and prayers of the lax community. I hope that we can all take time and appreciate the process and less time worrying about the final product."

Alison Edwards, a member of the West Morris Central Boys Lacrosse Parents Club, was one of the main planners of the event.

"This was such a special evening that united our entire local community and brought comfort, strength and support to two families going through challenging times," she said. "It was such an honor to be a part of what we hope will become an annual tradition. The event truly demonstrated the power of community and paying it forward, and we were so grateful to play a small role in bringing the vision for 'Its not just a game...it's a community' to life."



Gavin Collins (7) of Gill St. Bernard's has the ball while Brayden Fuller (34) defends for West Morris