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Ex-Illini Shawn Afryl's story lives on with shoe fund in his name

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Chicago Tribune

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Why a shoe fund? Donated cleats meant everything to ex-Illini Shawn Afryl.

SEPTEMBER 16, 2015, 7:00 AM

The black size-16 cleats are stiff with the sweat that dried years ago after countless summer two-a-days and break-of-dawn workouts. The toe is peeling from the sole like the mouth of a clam. Specks of mud are encrusted into them from years of digging into hard high school football fields. They meant everything to Shawn Afryl.

Donated by his Niles West coach when Shawn's family could not afford the purchase, they were the only pair he wore for four years of high school football, earning a Division I scholarship to Illinois in them. He never parted with them.



"They were part of his journey," said Sue Afryl, Shawn's mom, who keeps the cleats displayed on a shelf in her Skokie home. "As he progressed and got better, those shoes took on a whole new meaning and a whole new life. They're so much a part of who he was and what he did."

Now they're taking on new meaning again.

At 22, Shawn died of sudden cardiac arrest on July 21, 2014, on the Winona State practice field in Minnesota, where he was completing his college football career after graduating from Illinois with a degree in political science. Shortly after his death, Sue established the No. 56 Shawn Patrick Afryl Shoe Fund (www.56forever.org), designed to purchase athletic shoes for financially struggling families in honor of her son.

"We're a family who very much believes in giving back, even if it's small," Sue said. "I asked Shawn, 'What is it you would do to give back?' He said, 'Mom, it's easy. I'll start buying kids cleats who can't afford them so they can play.' What I learned after Shawn passed away is that he was already doing it."

Like any Division I athlete, Shawn was given the very best in athletic apparel, including at least three pairs of cleats per year with additional replacements if the shoes broke.

When he returned home on breaks from college, his trunk would hold boxes of shoes that he would give away to Niles West players and other big-footed area athletes who needed cleats.

"Anything he did not feel essential or necessary, he gave to someone else who needed them," Sue said. "This is why we're doing the shoe (fund). He would have found a way to do it. He already had."

The fund, which is held in a trust by the Evanston Community Foundation, is \$4,700 short of the \$10,000 needed to reach perpetual status, Sue said. Lacking resources and dealing with grief, raising funds has been challenging at times, but Sue said she's not stopping.

"Every time we make some headway, it's like, 'OK, Shawn, we're that much closer,'" Sue said. "Shawn, we're going to make it happen.' Shawn got behind not just sports but people."

Shawn was a 6-foot-4, 310-pound giant of a man, with a scruffy beard and a tattoo of a wolf inside a dreamcatcher on his right biceps. But his persona was gentle.

As a child, the Afryls would haul three grocery carts of Christmas presents into donation boxes.

College buddies recall him using his size to help drunken strangers get safely into cabs.

So Shawn understood the meaning of those cleats.

When he wanted to play at Niles West, Sue and her husband, Al, could not find affordable cleats larger than a size-14. A special order to fit his "battleship feet," as she called them, would have cost \$160.

"That was two weeks' grocery," she said. "Things were tight."

Curtis Tate, who then coached at Niles West, offered to buy the cleats rather than lose the burly offensive lineman. In return, Shawn helped set up and take down practice equipment.

"He was extremely humble," Tate said. "He was always about doing the little things for others."

The cleats became a retired token of his toil and sacrifice, but Shawn toted them along to his room at Illinois, where he played sparingly for three seasons as a guard. He took them again to Winona State, where he was completing his eligibility and continuing his education in order to teach high school history.

"They looked torn apart," said Chris O'Connor, his roommate and fellow lineman at Illinois. "When he got a new pair, his eyes just lit up, 'Wow, I get new cleats?' He appreciated the little things. He didn't take anything for granted."

Shawn made good use of the cleats in high school, Tate said. His dedication was unmatched, helping him become the nation's 16th-rated guard and earn scholarship offers from Illinois, Indiana, Purdue and Iowa.

"Shawn was a talented kid because of his work ethic," Tate said. "He would just rep, rep, rep something until he got it. He just worked so hard, you would know he's going to get it."

Sue said she would not want a young athlete like Shawn to miss out on a college education because of something as simple as shoes.

Every voucher for shoes will include a tag that tells Shawn's story.

"Now when anyone gets a pair of those cleats with that note, it's kind of like Shawn now saying, 'Go grab your chance,'" Sue said. "'Go reach for your star.'"

Sue delivered dozens of shoes to athletes at Muchin College Prep, collected by an Illinois alumnus. Current Illinois linemen and former teammates are saving their extra cleats to donate to the fund.

For Sue, the fund is Shawn's way of continuing to give.

"Any parent who has lost their child, one of their biggest fears is eventually that people will forget them," Sue said. "You won't ever forget them. You won't ever stop loving them. But people will forget them. This is keeping Shawn's memory alive and keeping all the good things he did going. It's not a lot, but it's all that's left."

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