



See our annual high school Spring Sports Preview on pages B1-B6.

PINE RIVER

“

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– TESSILY GREGORY



Nancy Vogt / Echo Journal

Tessily Gregory, 18, watches her daughter, Cress, do a puzzle with Adelheid, 12 - Tessily's sister and Cress's aunt - Friday, March 26, at the family's Pine River home.

Teen hopes her story of becoming a mother at age 16 inspires others

By Nancy Vogt
Editor

It wasn't the plan. But when Pine River teen Tessily Gregory became pregnant at age 15, instead of giving up her dreams to attend college she forged ahead.

Now at age 18, Tessily is preparing to graduate from Pine River-Backus High School in early

June with her classmates, at the same time receiving her two-year associate's degree from Central Lakes College.

In August, she plans to move to Pennsylvania with her 2-year-old daughter, Cress, to attend Misericordia University's Women with Children Program. It's one of only a handful of such programs in

the United States.

When Tessily talks about her journey, she makes it sound so simple and easy. But that's not the case. She and her family agreed to share her story in hopes of inspiring other teens in the same situation.

"I just heard about a young teen mom who was living house

to house, sleeping on the couch with her baby in tow wherever she could find a place," Tessily's mom, Robbi, wrote in an email. "This might show other young women that this doesn't mean the end - if they fight for it. Because this definitely did not come easy."

TEEN MOM: Page A16

CROSSLAKE

Churchgoers undertake charitable challenge

They put money where their mouth is

By Travis Grimler
Staff Writer

Pastor Mark Holmen of the Crosslake Log Church surprised 50 volunteers of his congregation Feb. 28 with

a challenge inspired by his "What's Your Why?" sermon series.

"The last sermon in that series is 'Why doesn't God do something?'" Hol-

men said. "Because a lot of people live in a world (that asks) why doesn't God do something about hunger?"

CHALLENGE: Page A6

PEQUOT LAKES



Chase Decker's football teammates were supportive of him Thursday, April 1, 2021, when they gathered in the Pequot Lakes Athletic Center for Decker's early graduation ceremony so he can go to basic training April 13.

Travis Grimler / Echo Journal

Historical Pine River, Backus yearbooks archived online

By Travis Grimler
Staff Writer

Yearbooks going back as far as 1936 are now available to view online for graduates of Pine River High School.

Backus yearbooks going back to

1948 have also been digitized, as have all of the high school yearbooks under the merged school districts thanks to Heritage Group North, a Legacy grant and area residents.

ARCHIVED: Page A12

Senior graduates early to depart for basic training

By Travis Grimler
Staff Writer

Pequot Lakes High School held a rare early graduation for one of its students Thursday, April 1, so he could head to

basic training while the rest of his classmates finish their final year.

Chase Decker begins training with the Army National Guard on April 13. When the school

administration learned of his upcoming training, they pulled out all the stops to allow him to graduate early.

EARLY GRAD: Page A12

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Magazine produced by the Echo Journal

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TEEN MOM

From Page A1

For Tessily, first came the difficult task of telling her family – mom, Robbi; dad, Troy; and younger siblings, Otis, Lyndon, Adelheid and Freya – that she was pregnant as a high school sophomore. With their support, she continued attending school.

“I was wanting to go to college, so I was working hard in school and everything,” Tessily said. “And then I found out I was pregnant. And that really was kind of scary. But after doing research, I found that there were six programs around the country where I could go to college. So since then, I’ve been contacting those different programs, and I was able to get into the No. 1 one in the nation.”

Her parents were fully supportive from the start, though Troy admitted to being scared for his daughter’s future.

“I know she felt like her world was over,” Robbi said. “She didn’t work that hard for everything to be over. We would find a way for her to still go to college. It would just look different. So she grieved for that for a little bit and then it was like she said, she just started researching.”

Daughter Cress threw another fork in the path when she was born three months early in late April 2019. At a routine doctor’s appointment, Tessily’s blood pressure was high and it was discovered she had preeclampsia. She was taken by ambulance to St. Cloud Hospital where Cress eventually was born via emergency cesarean section, weighing just 1 pound, 10 ounces.

“It was in the neonatal intensive care unit that we stopped calling my granddaughter by her first name and began calling her Moxie, the middle name chosen before we had even a glimmer of an idea of just how apt it would be,” Robbi wrote in the email reflecting on her daughter’s journey.

Cress, or Moxie as many call her, stayed in the NICU in St. Cloud for 70 days. Though a minor at age 16, Tessily took on the role of mother immediately.

“The day Moxie was born, Tessily discarded any last vestiges of youth and became a mother fighting and praying for her daughter’s life,” Robbi wrote. “As Moxie’s mother, she was the person whom the experts consulted with. By going to rounds held by the doctors, and speaking with nurses, Tessily had a very clear understanding of her daughter’s immediate needs.”

Her parents say Tessily has always been mature, and that she was so patient and attentive, and handled the whole situation with grace. She divided her time between attending high school and being in the NICU with Cress.

“It was unimaginably difficult to know that my daughter was fighting for her life

and I couldn’t be with her,” Tessily wrote in an email of Cress’s first day of life, when Tessily herself was recovering. “Later, I felt like I had no options with my education were I to not finish the school year, and so for a few weeks I went back and forth between high school and the NICU. Each moment I was away from her broke my heart.”

Tessily planned to attend high school in person her junior year, but when day care plans fell through she instead took classes online. That online learning continued this year, her senior year, because of the COVID-19 pandemic. She learned to reach out to teachers.

Cress keeps Tessily on her toes during the day, from snuggling in the morning to meals to daytime activities of puzzles, games, music and dancing. Cress loves reading books and outdoor adventures.

Nighttime brings a family board game, bath time, cleaning up toys, reading more books and then the long process of saying goodnight to everyone, Tessily said.

“An average day is so different than it was six months ago, or 12 months ago, and it will be different again as she grows,” Tessily wrote. “What won’t change is raising her to know that she is loved, that her world is a safe and predictable place that allows her to spread her wings and run right back to me when she falls.”

Tessily does her homework when Cress naps, then after Cress goes to bed at night she pulls out her laptop to work on online college courses until about midnight. She also works a few nights a week at Subway in Nisswa.

“Our life might seem small, but it is packed with love and a million moments each day that I wouldn’t give up for anything,” she wrote.

She’s learned that having a baby changes everything.

“You don’t get to be selfish. You have to think about their needs when making decisions about how you go about your day, about how you plan your life,” she wrote. “As it is no longer just my future, but also my daughter’s, every decision I make, big or small, is based on what is going to be best for her.”

She looks forward to pursuing a degree in early childhood education at a university that offers so much support and with other young mothers. She chose to attend Misericordia University because of all the Women With Children Program offers, including free room and board, free books for college, car insurance assistance, guaranteed on-campus work study jobs and more.

In addition, 100% of graduates in this program attain professional careers. Of hundreds of applicants, only 14 were chosen for admission.

“I’ve always been super future goal-oriented,” Tessily said.

Robbi wrote about how she sees her daughter as a mom:



Nancy Vogt / Echo Journal

Tessily Gregory and her daughter, Cress, who will turn two later this month, celebrate Cress’s successful trip down a slide Friday, March 26, at the family’s home in Pine River.

“During the day (and in the middle of the night when Moxie wakes up) Tessily is a full-time mom, doing the million things parents do without thinking twice. During Moxie’s first year there were weekly appointments and home visits and Tessily didn’t miss a single one.

“I remember very clearly what an average day looked like after a sleepless night of getting up with Moxie: pumping every 15 minutes (on recommendation from the county nurse), feeding and changing Moxie approximately every two hours, lots of snuggling and singing, playing and visiting with Moxie, making banana bread (the baking and eating are one of her staples for sanity), changing more diapers, getting schoolwork done in the evening in between Moxie’s waking moments, researching scholarships, researching colleges, talking to nurses, setting up home visits, taking time for her siblings to play a board game, and making time to go for a walk with me and Moxie in a snuggly.

“At the time, and even now, I cannot comprehend how she did it and she still does, all maintaining a positive attitude.”

Tessily said she had to learn not to be afraid to ask for help.

“I’m a very independent person, but I’ve come to realize that in order to have the best future for myself and my daughter, I needed to be open to support,” she wrote. “When I was 15 and pregnant, finding resources seemed intimidating and difficult, but there were a lot of people and places that worked to provide opportunities to give Moxie and I the best start. Outside of my family, I found a lot of nonjudgmental support at LAPS (Lakes Area

Pregnancy Support) in Brainerd. Here they had classes and people to talk to about what I was going through.”

She said Cress’s father is part of their daughter’s life, and he spends time with her a few days a week.

Today, Cress is an energetic and busy almost-2-year-old who is almost potty trained. She’s petite with short, curly hair and big eyes. She says her aunt’s and uncle’s names, and calls Robbi “Lolly”

and Troy “Bapa.” She eyed the stranger at her house talking to her mom and grandparents with curiosity and a bit of suspicion, but soon warmed up and “showed off” a bit.

“She’s very funny. And she knows when she’s funny,” Robbi said.

Robbi said her daughter is a teen mother who defies the stereotype of “teen mom.” She’s most proud of Tessily’s attitude – her resilience

and determination to build a beautiful world for herself and her daughter, both in the present and future.

Tessily’s dad agreed. “I’m just very proud of the strength and drive she’s continued to have,” Troy said.

“I feel super blessed,” he said. “It wasn’t the plan, but it’s still a blessing for sure.”

Nancy Vogt may be reached at 218-855-5877 or nancy.vogt@pineandlakes.com. Follow her on Facebook and on Twitter at www.twitter.com/@PEJ_Nancy.




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