

IN SPORTS, A8 WEST'S COLLINS, HALEY DECIDE ON D1

IN CURRENTS, C1 PRIDEFEST RETURNS



IN LOCAL & STATE, B1 A BIG SUMMER AT THE POOL



Jordan Smith

Nissa Sugden holds the phone Friday while her son, Kian Olson, talks to her and friend Jen Wettergren over Facetime from the Mankato hospital.

Family deals with brutal COVID reality

Local teen in and out of ICU

By Jordan Smith jsmith@mankatofreepress.com

Nissa Sugden expected this story to be about her son recovering from COVID-19.

On Monday, 19-year-old Kian Olson was taken off the ventilator that had

breathed for him the past several days. The staff at Mayo Clinic Health System in Mankato had decided he was ready for assisted oxygen in moderate doses from a thin tube.

Nurses had arranged for Kian to be moved to the progressive care unit, a step down from intensive care, later in the week.



Kian Olson

Sugden's mind jumped ahead in time, she said Friday morning. She began rearranging his bedroom to accommodate any medical equipment he might depend on for the upcoming weeks. She replaced the shower doors

with a curtain because she knew Kian would need a shower bed.

She was "trying to prep the home for him to come home because I didn't know — any day he could be released. And then, you know, within an hour it's like, 'Oop, just kidding,'" Sugden said with a pained laugh.

Sugden is a mother of two, and on Thursday night her 15-year-old daughter had a volleyball game in

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TODAY'S OBITUARIES

- Robert 'Bob' Maurice Gaarder
• Cheryl B. Haefner

MORE ONLINE

9/11 chaplain's admirers persist

Among the nearly 3,000 people killed in the 9/11 terror attacks, Mychal Judge, a Catholic chaplain with New York's fire department, left a uniquely complex legacy that continues to evolve 20 years after his death.

Read the story at mankatofreepress.com.

LOTTERY

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WEATHER, PAGE B10

Pleasant

High in the mid 70s. Low around 50.



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Mankato, Minnesota

9/11/01 ATTACKS: 20TH ANNIVERSARY

OFF TO WAR

Three friends joined military after 9/11



Courtesy Michael McLaughlin

Michael McLaughlin, now the Blue Earth County veteran services officer, served two tours in Iraq, beginning in 2004 and 2006.

Dangerous but mostly hard work, they said

By Kristine Goodrich kgoodrich@mankatofreepress.com

When terrorists killed nearly 3,000 Americans on Sept. 11, 2001, Luke Weinandt didn't question his plan to join the Army.

Weinandt and close friend Jesse Shepard enlisted via the Army's Delayed Entry Program during a time of peace.

Weinandt, a 2001 East High School grad, "never thought twice," about following through on that commitment. Even as the first U.S. troops were sent to the Middle East and his future was looking much more dangerous.

"We knew where we'd be going,"

Weinandt said.

He was following a family legacy of military service, and the events of Sept. 11 only strengthened his resolve.

"We were really proud to go," he said.

Weinandt worked in construction waiting for Sheppard to finish his final year at East High School before they went off to basic training together.

Friend Michael McLaughlin, East class of 2002, meanwhile was mulling joining his friends in service.

He still remembers watching the World Trade Center towers collapse in an East classroom and his teacher telling the class: "We're

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An infographic examines how the 9/11 attacks changed the country.

going to war."

But by graduation day, the first wave of fighting in Afghanistan was waning. McLaughlin said he naively thought the war on terrorism was almost over.

He decided to go to community college and was in his first year of studying to become a wireless communications engineer when two calls changed his trajectory.

Weinandt and Sheppard called with the news they were being deployed to Iraq. The next morning McLaughlin was at a Marine Corps recruitment office.

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Coach survives cardiac arrest

Collapses near end of game

By Chad Courrier ccourrier@mankatofreepress.com

WASECA — Brad Wendland was feeling a little lightheaded near the end of Waseca's football game Friday, so he took off his head set and went to a knee for the final plays.

He remembers waking up some time later, hoping to give a postgame speech to his football team. What he didn't know at that time was that his heart had stopped. Only because of the quick actions of athletic trainers, a nurse that was in the crowd and local paramedics was he able to take a phone call from his hospital room in Mankato on Saturday.

"I'm just really lucky," Wendland, the head coach of the Bluejays, said. "There were some amazing people there, and for that reason, I'm still around."

With 31 seconds to play in Waseca's season-opener against St. Peter on Friday, Wendland, 48, collapsed on the sidelines. Medical personnel from both teams attended to Wendland until paramedics arrived, and after about 45 minutes of chest compressions and a shot from a defibrillator, he came to, feeling fine, other than some soreness in his chest from the CPR.

"I said, 'I want to get up,'



Brad Wendland

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COVID: His story has changed some minds

Continued from Page A1

Red Wing. During the two-hour drive to Nadine's match, with Sugden's boyfriend at the wheel, she received a call.

Something was wrong in Kian's unit.

Medical staff said, "He's trying to leave," she recalled.

Sugden would learn Kian was demanding to see his father, Mark Olson, who is in hospice care at his home in upper North Mankato. Her son had worked out in his head that if he fell asleep, his father — Sugden's ex-husband — who has battled pancreatic cancer for years would die.

Sugden on Friday estimated Kian had slept roughly six hours over the past five days.

He was enraged when told he couldn't leave the hospital. As Sugden will say, her son is large, strong and stubborn. There were 10 medical staffers in the room. He had to be sedated to relax.

She gave the nurses her permission to treat Kian as they saw fit. They decided that, although his oxygen level and the state of his pneumonia have measurably improved, he needed the one-on-one care provided only in an ICU.

Through the screen

On a cool, gray morning of drizzle, one yard in North Mankato was brighter than the rest. The words "Kian's Fight" are written in shiny silver lettering on a sign, contrasting with the green of the lawn.

Inside the home on Friday were Sugden and Jen Wettergren, a friend who has helped create Caring Bridge and GoFundMe pages in response to Kian's condition.

The living room could be an average makeshift workspace, surrounded by personal mementos glimpsed in video calls throughout the pandemic. A laptop sits open on a wooden TV tray. Papers are strewn about the coffee table in the room's center. Neither woman has done her day job in weeks, however.

Their mission has been to spread Kian's story and monitor his condition based on reports from his Mankato hospital care team.

On a television stand, a red booklet with "Mankato West High School" in gold letters on its cover holds Kian's diploma. Tucked inside are pictures of Kian as a boy. Nearby on a wooden stand is a newspaper front page showing his face below the words "COVID CRISIS."

Sugden's phone rings. "Hi honey!" she says. "Hi Mom," Kian says in a soft, dazed voice on the other end of Facetime.

He wears a white hospital gown and lies on a white sheet, his head small in the center of the frame. A nurse is heard shuffling in the background, occasionally interjecting in a kind tone to assist Kian.

Video or phone calls remain the only way Sugden can speak with her son. He has gradually become more lucid, holding a slow conversation with his mom for about 20 minutes that morning.

But typically Kian lapses into what Sugden calls a loop: He feels guilty for the position he's in, the money being spent on health care. He wonders about his own savings. He worries about his father.

When he smiles on the call, his mother tells him it's the first one she's seen on his face in two weeks. "Makes me wanna cry with happiness," she tells him, grinning.

Physically separated from her son, Sugden has spread his story hundreds of miles. It began with an Aug. 23 Facebook post urging others to be vaccinated and has progressed to twice-daily updates on Kian's Caring Bridge site.

Her son's staunch position against vaccination was cemented by nationally known commentators dismissive of the coronavirus, such as Ben Shapiro and Joe Rogan, who also has been diagnosed with COVID-19. Now Sugden has to



The front yard of Nissa Sugden's home.



Nissa Sugden and Jen Wettergren have spread Kian's story hundreds of miles from Sugden's living room in North Mankato.

reassure him that his friends plan to be vaccinated. Kian hopes to receive a shot the first day following the required 90 days of recovery.

It's not a political thing, Sugden repeats constantly, knowing it's more of a goal than a fact. A vaccine dramatically reduces the chances of severe COVID-19, she says, echoing medical experts and national health officials.

Her focus for weeks has been split between her son's concrete suffering and the hypothetical suffering of vaccine skeptics, as well as their families.

"The more I can tell the story of what Kian's going through — I'm trying to push them over the edge of whatever fear is holding them back from doing it," Sugden said of skeptics. "Because if we can keep somebody from having it — their family members from going through this ..."

After pausing, she begins again: "I mean, seeing your kid on a ventilator, and talking to him, watching his chest go up and down when it could be helped."

Tears forming and voice wavering, she finishes, "And then seeing him struggle afterwards ... is something nobody should have to go through if it can be helped."

Widespread impact

The number of people Kian's story has reached is likely in the thousands. The number of minds the story has changed is unknown.

But old and current personal friends have shared their changed views with Sugden, offering a sample of the impact wrought by her efforts.

Kim Gores, of Garden City, told The Free Press last week she ended her vaccine holdout as soon as she read that Kian was on a ventilator.

During the Facetime call, Sugden reassured Kian that several friends he named were either vaccinated or making plans to be.

Jen Hawley, who went to high school with Sugden and now lives in Colorado, said Friday her husband had resisted vaccination when the couple saw Sugden on Aug. 12, five days before Kian's positive test. She also opposed shots for her two children, 12 and 13, because of their youth.

Then Hawley, who was vacci-

More information

For daily medical updates, visit Kian Olson's Caring Bridge site.

To contribute to Kian's medical expenses, visit his GoFundMe page. Over \$7,000 have been donated so far to the \$15,000 goal.

Find a location offering free COVID-19 vaccinations near you by entering your zip code at the URL <https://www.vaccines.gov/>.

nated in March, and her husband heard about Kian's deterioration. The culmination of the Federal Drug Administration's recent approval of the Pfizer vaccine, the surge of the highly infectious delta variant and Kian's fight for his life convinced the couple.

Within days her husband and two children received their first shots.

Lori Hargrove's hardened resistance to the COVID-19 vaccine was completely erased when she learned about Kian, said the 46-year-old Welcome resident who knows Sugden.

Not only does she prefer holistic, at-home treatments to traditional medicine, but Hargrove's distrust also rested in the "ifs, mights, possibly and could" that she said characterized media and public health reports about the vaccine.

She compared her prior lack of familiarity with suffering caused by COVID-19 to the apathy non-soldiers may feel during a war. Everyone knows it's happening. Everyone knows there's tragedy. But in our houses, leading our mundane days, we don't directly experience the turmoil.

"We remove ourselves emotionally from a situation until it's affected us personally. And that's just how I felt."

Her husband and 17-year-old son had already tested positive for the virus but showed no symptoms. Hargrove said that further entrenched her rationale for avoiding the vaccine.

But now, having received a shot Monday, she finds herself trying to undo any resistance to vaccination she bred in her son. She tells him about someone else's teenage boy who was on a ventilator, struggling to live.

"It was a true physical anxiety of getting the vaccine. But Nissa and her family's story truly outweighed

that for me," Hargrove said. "If there was a fence, it tipped me over the fence."

"My fight against myself isn't worth what she's going through."

Unsettled future

Mark Olson knew that every time he bridged the topic of the coronavirus with his son, a fight would ensue. Nonetheless, he encouraged Kian to get vaccinated.

After looking at Kian, unresponsive with a tube in his throat or struggling for air during video calls about two weeks ago, his father said he began to wish he had pushed him harder.

"With my condition," Olson, 49, said of his hospice care and cancer, "I didn't want our last conversation to be a fight about COVID. I just let it go — it was easier that way — and I really wish I wouldn't have now."

It was Kian who brought Olson home from the hospital after his father caught the virus, an arrangement wherein the teenager was likely exposed to infection.

Doctors have told Olson there's nothing more he can do to fight his cancer. Speaking over the phone in an even, gravelly voice, he said he aims for each interaction with Kian to end well.

"He's afraid that I will pass away before he gets released, and he wants to see me one more time. At least one more time, he said."

Kian has said that when he leaves the hospital, he wants to visit his father's home immediately. The plan is for Sugden to bring her son to visit his father weekly, once she can see Kian.

And aside from the unknowns of his father's health and Kian's own mental well-being, Sugden still asks herself: When will Kian be home?

It's been nearly three weeks since he tested positive on Aug. 17, and she still has no clear idea when he might end his now two-week hospital stay. Kian's condition could still worsen before he moves permanently to recovery, she said.

She had thought her son's medical disruption would keep him from his life plans for maybe a few days, possibly weeks. But now the question of recovery leaves her dumbfounded. She hadn't imagined how long this would take.

She said Kian's immediate physical recovery already is beginning to be sidelined by long-term, overarching concerns.

She wonders: For how long will his cognitive function be impaired? When will he enroll in his third semester at the University of South Dakota? Forget when — *can* her intelligent son, the one who she says taught her to play chess when he was only 4, continue his studies at all?

"What is recovered? We don't know what is gonna happen afterwards. I don't know if (with his) mental capacity if he's gonna be able to go back to school. I don't know if he's going to have breathing issues for the rest of his life now. I don't know ..."

Sugden's voice trailed off.

"The unknowns are unbelievable."

COACH: Kept in hospital

Continued from Page A1

and a friend of mine said 'no,'" Wendland recounted Saturday. "I said, 'I'm fine, I'm fine,' but then I saw the ambulance and realized what had just happened."

"I just wanted to find (my wife) Kim," he said, his voice cracking.

Wendland said he remembers everything about the ambulance ride to Mankato, hearing the paramedics say his vital signs were good.

"I went from (cardiac) arrest to being fully aware and feeling fine, which I guess is pretty unusual," he said.

Waseca activities director Joe Hedervare was in the press box, tending to game-day operations, when he saw what was unfolding. He took off for the field, calling 911 on the way.

"I'm so grateful that (paramedics) are basically right across the street from the school," he said. "The reaction time was unbelievable. We go through training to get ready for this type of situation because you never know when it's going to be your turn. It was our turn (Friday). We saved a life."

The Bluejays were leading 21-13 when Wendland collapsed. After the 40-minute delay, the Waseca players said they wanted to finish the game for their coach. St. Peter tried a couple of passes, and the game ended.

Wendland, who has been the football coach at Waseca for 16 seasons, met with doctors late Friday night, hoping he would get to go home, but he was told he would be staying for most of this week, going through several tests to determine what went wrong. He has a hereditary condition involving a heart valve, but he was told that had nothing to do with Friday's collapse. He will have a silver-dollar-sized defibrillator implanted in his chest that might stop this from happening again.

"I kind of complained when they told me I couldn't go home," Wendland said. "The doctors said, 'Do you realize how many people survive cardiac arrest if they're not in the hospital?' I said, 'Half?' They said it was less than 1 percent."

Wendland said he will take the rest of the month off from teaching, and he's likely done coaching for this season.

"I really want to go back to the classroom because I love teaching," Wendland said. "I'm right where I need to be. I just need some time for self-reflection."

Because the Minnesota State High School League requires that a head coach be certified, Hedervare said he will likely become the head coach. He said that current staff will continue in their roles, with someone taking over play-calling duties, which Wendland handled.

Waseca is scheduled to play at Marshall on Friday.

"I'm so thankful everything worked out," Hedervare said. "It sounds weird to say we're grateful that it happened where it did. If he had been home alone, who knows? Thankfully, Brad is still with us."

Follow Chad Courrier on Twitter @ChadCourrier.

Florida — mask adverse and party happy — sees virus deaths surge

The Associated Press

MIAMI — Funeral director Wayne Bright has seen grief piled upon grief during the latest COVID-19 surge.

A woman died of the virus, and as her family was planning the funeral, her mother was also struck down. An aunt took over arrangements for the

double funeral, only to die of COVID-19 herself two weeks afterward.

"That was one of the most devastating things ever," said Bright, who also arranged the funeral last week of one of his closest friends.

Florida is in the grip of its deadliest wave of COVID-19 since the pandemic

began, a disaster driven by the highly contagious delta variant.

While Florida's vaccination rate is slightly higher than the national average, the Sunshine State has an outsize population of elderly people, who are especially vulnerable to the virus; a vibrant party scene; and a Republican governor

who has taken a hard line against mask requirements, vaccine passports and business shutdowns.

As of mid-August, the state was averaging 244 deaths per day, up from just 23 a day in late June and eclipsing the previous peak of 227 during the summer of 2020. (Because of both the way deaths are

logged in Florida and lags in reporting, more recent figures on fatalities per day are incomplete.)

Hospitals have had to rent refrigerated trucks to store more bodies. Funeral homes have been overwhelmed.

Hospitals have been swamped with patients who, like Miles' husband

and mother-in-law, hadn't gotten vaccinated.

Florida made an aggressive effort early on to vaccinate its senior citizens. But Dr. Kartik Cherabuddi, a professor of infectious diseases at the University of Florida, said the raw number of those who have yet to get the shot is still large.