

Lang III: Heroes can make wrong turns, abuse drugs

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(Photo: Submitted photo)

From the day we're old enough to decipher information, we're taught about heroes -- from the media to history books to Hollywood. They are leaders. They are flawless. Often, they don't seem human.

But heroes can make bad choices. They can get hooked on drugs. When offered a fork in the road of life, they may choose to go left when they should have hung a right. Heroes aren't always perfect. In fact, heroism can spawn from poor decisions.

Captain Shreve product Sam Lees took a few left turns in his life, so when he passed at the age of 20 on April 16, 2015, even his parents, Sam and Mary Lees, were skeptical.

Dubbed "Little Sam," despite measuring 6-foot-4, the former multi-sport athlete used marijuana. That misstep was parlayed into a prescription drugs addiction. In the summer of 2014, he realized he needed help and approached his parents. On the advice of the Council of Alcoholism & Drug Abuse, the Lees Family found a place to begin the road to recovery.

It appeared as if Little Sam earned a new lease on life. In November of 2014, he completed the treatment program and soon enrolled in night school. His fascination with law led to a part-time job at a local firm.

Not long after starting school, Little Sam moved out of the family home.

"Like any caring parents, Mary and I were concerned with the temptations that independence might create," Sam's father said.

A couple of months later, Sam and Mary asked their boy to move back home. He told them he'd think about it. He died two weeks later.

Based on the initial findings, the family assumed the cause of death was an accidental overdose.

"Mary and I were asking why? We thought Sam had moved past that part of this life," dad said.

However, weeks after their son's death, the Lees learned the cause was not a relapse or another left turn. He died from natural causes -- bronchial pneumonia, possibly acute respiratory distress syndrome (A.R.D.S.).

"God decided it was time for him to come home," Sam's father said.

However, Little Sam's death did not have to signal the end of his courageous battle with his inner demons.

During Little Sam's struggles, he was often reminded of a family saying: "Look in the mirror. You are who you choose to be."

The response, whether truthful or not, was generally, "Dad, the mirror is fine."

Following Little Sam's death, the Lees started "Look in the Mirror Foundation." The mission is to talk with teenagers and young adults about making better choices and being responsible for their actions.

"It all starts with looking in the mirror and realizing the choices begin with the person that is looking back at you," Sam Lees said. "This is not just about drugs and alcohol; it is about life choices as well."

Nine days before the one-year anniversary of Little Sam's death, his father spoke to the Captain Shreve baseball team.

"Our players were familiar with Sam's story, but to hear it first hand from his father was powerful," Gators head coach Todd Sharp said.

Mary Lees spent much of Sam Jr.'s childhood driving to swim meets and tennis tournaments. The lanky LSU fan also loved golf. The sweet-swinging lefty was teammates with current Tiger Nathan Jeansonne at Youree Drive Middle.

"His goal was to beat me in golf," Sam's father said. "He got close one time. He beat me on the front nine, but I ended up having a lower score for the 18."

That victory was imminent as Little Sam had just fallen back in love with the game before his time was cut short.

"Mary and I always thought we were teaching Sam and trying to guide him to make better choices," Sam Lees said. "We now realize that Sam was teaching us."

The kid with a giant heart is still making progress. And his missteps are helping others stay on track.

"He did make some bad choices along the way," dad said. "As much as we don't want to think about that, it does need to be addressed.

"But in the end, he was our hero."

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Look in the Mirror Foundation

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