

Active high school senior dies 'at the crest of her wave'

When the Nazareth Academy class of 1986 marches down the aisles of the Eastman Theatre next month — decked out in white formal gowns and carrying red roses adorned with blue ribbons — Colleen Gullen won't be in the procession. Colleen, the cheery Nazareth senior featured on the Courier-Journal's first *Echo* page (January 16), died Wednesday, May 7, 1986.

Colleen's death came as a progression of spina bifida, a spinal defect that had left her paralyzed from the waist down. Confined to a wheelchair, she had often felt cut off from her peers until she entered high school. But in these last four years — and especially in the weeks before her death — Colleen had become as much like other girls her age as possible. Only four days before she was stricken with a brain-stem collapse at her Penfield home, Colleen had attended Nazareth's annual Father-Daughter Dinner Dance with her father, Martin Gullen. She was looking forward to graduation and starting Nazareth College next fall. She even planned to attend her senior ball.

In his homily during the Mass of Christian Burial for Colleen, Father James Moynihan, pastor of St. Joseph's Church in Penfield, said her death can be seen as a "frustrated dream or a short-circuited ambition, as plans that will never be realized ... Her father has a different view, and I ask you to try to hang on to that view. Her father said she died at the crest of her wave. It was a wave she was climbing for 19 years against all odds," Father Moynihan noted.

"At Nazareth Academy, she really achieved and accomplished everything she set out to do. She achieved during school hours and after school hours," he continued, citing Colleen's involvement in such extracurricular activities as the Nazareth Freshman and Perosian choirs, newspaper, literary magazine and yearbook as well as her volunteer work at St. Mary's Hospital, receptionist duties at St. Joseph's rectory and her participation in the parish's folk and youth groups.

"In our own imperfect and very limited way, we think of death as a catastrophe. We think of it as an enemy. We think of it as something to be avoided. In another way it can be a friend," Father Moynihan said. "I think that's the way Colleen looked at death. I know she wasn't afraid of it."

He explained that when Colleen was stricken Tuesday afternoon, she told her mother "I'll be OK, mom. I'm just going to take a little rest." She had leaned back against the pillow and closed her eyes. "Now she's given her eyes to someone else," Father Moynihan said, "and I hope that person can



In memory of their classmate Colleen Gullen, members of Nazareth Academy's Perosian Choir sang the school's alma mater, "The Lord Is My Light," at her Mass of Christian Burial.

see the world as clearly as Colleen saw it and understand as deeply as she understood.

"She really had reached her peak," Father Moynihan concluded. "Only God could have taken her any higher, and He did."

Though Colleen will not go through graduation ceremonies with her class, it is clear that in some way, she will remain with her friends and classmates at Nazareth and that they, in turn, will remain with the Gullen family.

Numerous vehicles — from private cars and the Nazareth van to a school bus — were pressed into service to take Nazareth students and a number of teachers to the funeral Mass at St. Joseph's. During the Mass, the Perosian Choir, of which Colleen had been such a proud member, sang the school's alma mater, "The Lord Is My Light." The choir's other song was expressive of the effect Colleen had had on the lives of those at Nazareth. "Without love," it proclaimed, "I am nothing." Let the rivers run dry, "but don't let the day begin without love."

Love was Colleen's gift to her classmates and teachers at Nazareth. "The reason we said yes to Colleen immediately — we didn't even think of building modifications, which we had to do — is that we thought it would be really good for our kids," said Sister Carol Cimino, director of development at Nazareth. Sister Carol cited several examples in which students had matured through helping Colleen — wheeling her to and from classes and lunch, and even carrying her onto stage for Perosian performances. "What a picture, this one kid carrying another!" Sister Carol exclaimed.

Sister Carol said that Colleen's mother, Nancy Gullen, had related an anecdote from Colleen's first choir performance. As Mrs.

Gullen watched her daughter sing, something had seemed to cross Colleen's face. Asked about it on the way home, Colleen had replied, "Mom, for the first time I wasn't different; I was one of the kids."

"Colleen always had something funny to tell you," Sister Carol recalled. "She'd wave her finger at you to bend down ... she loved little jokes and one-liners."

"When you (the Courier-Journal) did the story on her, I joked with her that I had to go on another game show because she was getting more publicity. She thought that was very funny."

"She always had a real cheery outlook on life. She was so eager to please, to meet everybody's expectations. She was such a



Jeff Goulding/Courier-Journal
Colleen Gullen

young kid," Sister Carol concluded.

Nazareth students and faculty will remember Colleen with a memorial service this week. And, in a sense, Colleen's family will have a part in the ceremonies at the Eastman Theatre. The traditional graduation bouquet of red roses tied with a blue ribbon, which Colleen was to have carried down the aisle, was among the floral arrangements that adorned her coffin at the funeral parlor.

In addition to her parents, Colleen is survived by four sisters, Michelle, Debra, Erin and Stephanie; her brother, Marty; and several aunts, uncles and cousins. Donations may be made to the Spina Bifida Association of Rochester, P.O. Box 3, Fairport, N.Y. 14450.

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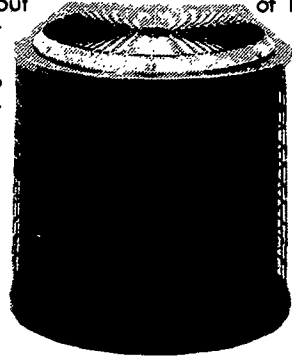
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