



## *Remembering Casey Russell*

*Submitted by Angela Scott, Gravette HOSA advisor, with the permission of the Russell Family.*

*“While we are mourning the loss of our friend, others are rejoicing to meet him behind the veil.” -John Taylor*

**K**nowing **Casey Wayne Russell** was a privilege. He left you with a smile and was the kind of friend who made everything an adventure and turned the dull-drums of everyday life into fun. He put his heart into everything he did but still managed to maintain a “silly” side.

Casey, a Junior at Gravette High School, was a varsity football and baseball player, a member of multiple clubs, including Health Occupations Students of America. A two-time state medalist in Veterinary Assisting, he also competed at the National HOSA conferences in Dallas, Texas, and Nashville, Tennessee.

What happened to Casey shouldn't have happened. But, I imagine that is what you would expect to be said when any young life is taken suddenly.

On Wednesday, September 16, 2009, Casey was participating in football practice. He had taken what he called a “funny hit” that really hurt in his lower back. The coaches pulled him from practice and sent him to a doctor. Casey was seen by a chiropractor each of the next two days who took x-rays and gave him several adjustments, sometimes two or three a day, because his hips were out of alignment. His symptoms at this time pointed to a possible pinched nerve and his course of treatment followed accordingly.

Casey had some limited improvement but did not return to football. He rode with his parents to the game in Wellington, Kansas, a five hour ride, to be on the sidelines to support his teammates. During the game, several noticed Casey was having trouble standing, often having to lean on teammates for support. Still, a pinched nerve was thought to be the culprit.

As Saturday came, Casey was able to have dinner at a friend's home followed by a movie. However, by Sunday afternoon and evening, Casey was feeling poorly again. His major symptom was still pain, and some nausea, but no fever. On Monday, Casey was in severe pain that was moving up his back. His parents tried to get him in to the orthopedist earlier than their scheduled appointment but had to settle for an appointment with the family doctor, a general physician, instead.

At the family doctor's office, more x-rays were taken with no results. Casey was still not running any fever, so pain medications were given to help Casey rest through the night until he could see the specialist the next day. By Tuesday (September 21) morning, however, Casey was having trouble standing on his own and had difficulty urinating. He was increasingly worse by his 2:00 p.m. appointment. The specialist examined him and ordered him to the hospital for an MRI of his lumbar spine. During the MRI, it was determined Casey had an infection between the L4 and L5 vertebrae and within his spinal column, that was pressing on his spinal cord threatening paralysis. There was also an abscess to the right of his spine beneath the muscle. Due to the pressure on his spinal cord, it was determined Casey was in renal failure. The specialist brought Casey's parents in for conference advising them emergency surgery would be needed immediately to relieve the pressure on his nerves, clear the spinal column of infection, and clean up the abscess.

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At 4:50 p.m., Casey was prepped and ready for surgery. The estimated time for surgery was at least an hour and a half. Periodically, the surgeon would send word to the family everything was going fine. After closing up his incisions, the surgeon left Casey with the anesthesiologist to bring him out of anesthesia. A few minutes later, the anesthesiologist requested the surgeon leave his dictation and return to the operating room. Casey was not coming out of anesthesia.

The surgeon and the anesthesiologist explained what had taken place to the family but were not sure why Casey was not waking up. More devastating, Casey was not breathing on his own. They, at first, thought Casey might have had a reaction to the anesthesia, so the doctors conferred with Children's Hospital in Little Rock, Arkansas. The decision was made to fly Casey to the Pediatric Intensive Care Unit at Children's Hospital. Casey's helicopter landed in Little Rock about 1:15 in the morning. Casey's mother, Lori, was allowed to fly in the Angel Flight helicopter with him. I was waiting for Lori in Little Rock. I happened to be in the city for another meeting. At 2:30, Lori and I were conferencing with his lead physician at Children's Hospital who asked many questions and expressed her concern over Casey's not waking up. She described his condition as septic and had great concern for his brain.

While Casey's father, Blaine, and his two sisters, Lindsey and Lana, drove to Little Rock, doctors were comparing test results of their own with those from the hospital in Northwest Arkansas. After examinations by several physicians and numerous tests, the family was informed Casey suffered from a staph infection. At 11:00 a.m., September 23, Casey was pronounced brain dead.

The family was now faced with the decision to leave Casey on life support or to take him off. Since Casey had such great interest in the medical field and a desire to help others, his family attempted organ donation. However, organ donation was not possible. Casey's infection was MRSA staph. It was suspected to be systemic which made organ donation impossible. Preliminary results from Casey's autopsy confirmed his infection had gone systemic. Sections from various organs revealed staph presence.

We have many questions concerning Casey's passing, not the least of which being "why?". In the early hours of the morning, as we listened to doctors and answered their questions, we finally had to ask, "How this could be missed?" The lead physician at Children's Hospital told us, "This is what we see when this happens. We have otherwise healthy, strong kids, often football players, who have no symptoms other than pain. They will usually be able to attribute their pain to some hit or fall in practice or another activity just like Casey. When they do develop symptoms indicating something greater is wrong, it is often too late. Doctors don't always have reason to suspect there is an infection as an underlying cause."

Through the entire course of his illness, Casey never ran a fever. We realize we will probably never know exactly how Casey contracted this infection. Many of our questions surrounding Casey's illness and passing remain unanswered. For the Russell family and those who loved Casey, there will always be questions. The wish is for other families to learn from this experience and be able to ask the questions while there is still time for an answer.

*We celebrate his life, count ourselves blessed to have known him, and miss his goofy smirk everyday. We hope, as he would, the telling of his story might prevent the loss of another child.*