

# Football a galvanizing bond for pair of grieving Medfield High seniors

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Medfield High seniors John Williams (left) and Bryan Carrabis will play their final high school football game on Thanksgiving Day against Dover-Sherborn. SUZANNE KREITER/GLOBE STAFF/GLOBE STAFF

MEDFIELD – Football is often considered a metaphor for life.

It is a game that teaches courage, morals, and discipline; a game that preaches the importance of overcoming adversity and being there for others.

To many it sounds cliché. Not to the Medfield High football program.

This season, the Warrior family has been forced to deal with a pair of devastating losses off the field.

On Sept. 17, Billy Carrabis, the father of senior defensive tackle Bryan Carrabis, died after a lengthy bout with cancer. Seven days later, senior wide receiver John Williams lost his father, Ray, who had been

diagnosed with the disease a few weeks earlier.

Football, in a galvanizing way, helped the community deal with its tremendous grief.

"No one really knew what to do at first," said Medfield High senior captain George Sawan.

"But we kind of bonded together, stuck together as a group, and made our way through it. It's always going to be there over our heads, but I think we really came together and showed support for them.

"It really showed what football can do for a team outside of actually playing the sport."

The acts of kindness began immediately.

The night after Billy Carrabis died, the Warriors defeated Winthrop. Senior quarterback Tim Warren presented the game ball to Carrabis's wife, Cathy.

The morning after Ray Williams's death, dozens of Medfield High football players and their families arrived at the family's home with food and offers of condolences. In addition to John, his young brother Stephen is a freshman quarterback on the Medfield junior varsity.

"The best of Medfield comes out in the worst of times," said Medfield High coach Erik Ormberg. "That just shows you what this town is all about. These kids and this program are an extension of that.

"People rally, people want to do the right thing, and that's what I think makes Medfield a special place.

When the season began, Bryan Carrabis and John Williams did not know each other well; they only had played together sparingly over the past year.

Their relationship, however, quickly transformed into a special bond in the midst of tragedy.

Williams reached out to Carrabis when Carrabis's father died to pledge his support and pass on news of his own father's diagnosis.

"He was wondering how you get through it," said Carrabis, who played football for the first time as a junior.

"I said, 'Just be strong, know that everyone loves you and everyone's got your back no matter what.' Hopefully we can have each other's backs and talk through it. That's what we've been doing."

Carrabis joined his teammates at the Williams's home the morning after to offer condolences.

"We didn't really know each other until this year," said Williams. "We were always on different teams. Now it's a bond that we have. It's a special bond, not for a good reason, but we'll be good friends [going forward]."

Cathy Carrabis has seen first-hand the growth and strengthening of that brotherhood.

"I was talking with John and he said no one else knows what we're going through but each other," she said.

"Neither one of them is going to judge if they want to break down and cry or if they just want to be angry. They're there to help each other through it.

"It's a remarkable bond that the two of them have. It's unfortunate, but it's nice to see that something good can come out of something so horrible."

The good has extended far and wide.

One teammate's family reached out to the New England Patriots to ask if there was anything the organization could do to help lift the boys' spirits.

A few days later, a special visitor showed up at a Warrior practice.

"I was sitting there on the sideline and I'm looking over my shoulder like 'who's that kid?' Just looks like another one of the guys," said Bryan Carrabis.

"Then I'm looking over and I'm like 'Oh my God, that's Julian Edelman.' "

The Patriots star receiver delivered a stirring speech in which he encouraged the team to be tough and never give up. Then he handed the brothers of Carrabis and Williams each a signed football.

The community support has been "really great, it just makes it that much easier to get through every day stuff," said John Williams, who attended the Patriots' thrilling last-second victory over the Giants in New York last Sunday at the invitation of family friends.

His mother, Noreen Sheridan, is grateful for the outlet football has provided her two sons — and Carrabis — during such a difficult time.

"If they didn't have football they would be much worse off," she said. "Football has really pulled them together. They're going right to practice after school and they're coming home and they are so happy that they're involved with the program.

"This team has been through a lot this season and they've really stuck together. I think they've really made some lifelong friendships. My kids will never forget this . . . I think it's given them hope and it's set an example for them that there are good people in the world that care about them."

On Thursday morning at 10, Carrabis and Williams will suit for their final varsity game when the Warriors (3-7) host Tri-Valley League rival Dover-Sherborn (6-4) in their 50th Thanksgiving Day meeting.

Regardless of the final score, Medfield will leave the field with pride, having accomplished something much more significant than winning a football game.

"I certainly hope they come out with a victory," said Cathy Carrabis.

"But at the end of the day, at the end of the season, they absolutely are winners in my book. Every last one of these kids will hold a special place in my heart."

A remarkable, and tragic, football journey is coming to an end. But it's one that a community, a football team, and a pair of seniors won't soon forget.

"Once it goes away, it goes away," said Bryan Carrabis of the end of his football career. "It's just like when dad passed away. You're going to lose it, but the memories . . . they never go away."