

Ojai grad's spirit lives on through organ donations

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Nate Rhoades, a graduate of Ojai's Nordhoff High School, overcame drug addiction to become a certified fitness trainer until a car crash in Oxnard last month left him brain dead.

Surrounded by family and friends at Ventura County Medical Center, the 21-year-old died on Jan. 25, five days after the accident, and became an organ donor to as many as 100 people, his family said.

"He really grew from his challenges and struggles, and then he was really committed to helping other people," said his mother Heidi Allison. "I think that's an important piece to tell. He wasn't this perfect kid. None of us are but it's how he grew from his challenges."

Rhoades, who graduated in 2019, started using marijuana before turning to pills when he was 14 and 15. His parents said they were able to get him into a rehabilitation facility and hire a recovery coach.

"He really worked hard in his recovery," Allison said.

Rhoades played football for four years at Nordhoff mostly as a linebacker with some wide receiver duties. He became a defensive MVP for the team, his mother said.

"He was super, super kind and had a ton of empathy. He also was this super intense athlete," Allison said.

The deadly crash occurred around 10:15 p.m. Jan. 20 when Rhoades' Saturn sedan crashed into a semi-truck, which was making a U-turn on Victoria Avenue near Doris Avenue, according to the Oxnard Police Department.

The driver of the truck had no injuries and cooperated with the investigation, according to a news release. The investigation is ongoing but no arrests have been made, said Paul Carganilla, community affairs manager at the Oxnard Police Department.

Rhoades had left his Oxnard home

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and was headed to a friend's house, said his father Larry Rhoades. The semi-truck made an unexpected U-turn in front of his son's vehicle and "by the time he saw it, he went under the trailer," Larry Rhoades said.

After Rhoades was transported to the hospital, a representative for OneLegacy, the organ recovery organization based in Los Angeles, approached the family and asked if they might want to donate his organs.

Allison said the decision, which could save so many lives, was easy.

In California, drivers who wish to have their organs donated in the event of an emergency can have a pink dot on their driver's license signifying that decision. Larry Rhoades said his son had not gotten to the point of making that decision but he and his wife felt confident that their only child would have wanted to donate his organs.

"He would have done this in two seconds, and honestly the minute we made that decision it helped us so much with the grief," Allison said.

Rhoades' organs will help up to 100 people, the parents were told, starting with a woman in her late 20s who received his liver and heart. One man received a kidney and pancreas while another man received his other kidney, they said. Rhoades' skin and other tissues will help burn victims. His cornea and bone marrow will help others.

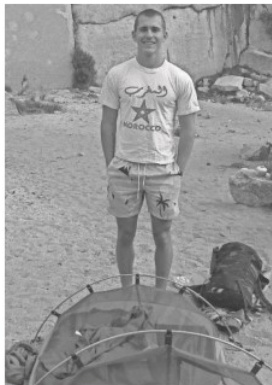
"They said he was in stellar shape and what we did is we basically donated everything," Allison said.

On the day Rhoades organs were harvested, family and friends gathered at the hospital and held signs during a ceremony that honored him. Some wore football jerseys to pay tribute to the athlete.

Friend Emily Ricks Hahn performed a song that she wrote titled "First Friend" on an acoustic guitar. She said he was her first friend in Ojai but they lost touch when she and her family moved.

"I think Nate was always so free spirited and down to do anything," said Hahn, who is an actress and singer. "He was always loud and fun and not afraid to be goofy. He didn't care about being cool or being perceived a certain way."

Autumn Rojelio, Rhoades' girlfriend of nearly four years, said they met in 2018 through a mutual friend who lived



Nate Rhoades
ALLISON

in Ojai.

"Me and Nate were such silly, goofy people," Rojelio said. "That's what I fell in love with. A person who can make me laugh attracts me. Everything was so effortless with him."

She met him after he had overcome his struggles with addiction and never saw that side of him.

"I think it would be an injustice to paint him as someone who just struggled with drug abuse," Rojelio said. "He had controlled it and found ways to cope."

She described Rhoades as having a "comforting soul" who gave people hope.

"The most striking thing about him was his ability to see the glass half full in any situation," she said. "What was most important is that he persevered and carried himself with confidence."

His parents want to start a nonprofit center called Nate's Place with weight lifting, boxing and music for kids.

"We know how much all these activities helped Nate," Larry Rhoades said. A GoFundMe account was created to pay for Rhoades' medical expenses and the center, his parents said.

A celebration of his life will be held at noon on March 19 at Soule Park in Ojai that is open to the public.

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