

Making the Grade

BY BERT KELLY & LINDSAY JONES

IN MANY WAYS, Kyle Summers was a typical high school senior when he graduated fourth in his class from Bishop Byrne High School in 2004. He was planning his freshman year at Christian Brothers University, had a summer job, and played video games on his computer.

But he was actually far from typical. For one thing, he could hardly sit still at his graduation ceremony, because he kept being called to the podium to accept awards. But his life prior to graduation had been anything but typical.

Summers was born two months premature. Doctors told his mother, Andrea Payne, that he wouldn't live. And if he did live, they told her, he'd have developmental problems.

Then his father left when he was three years old.

The year before Summers' high school graduation, Payne suffered a job-related back injury that kept the single mother from being able to work. She soon fell behind in her rent and eventually they were evicted from the Whitehaven home they'd lived in for seven years.

"I did not know what I was going to do but trust the Lord," Payne said.

It was Payne's strong faith that led her to call a friend and ask her to pray for her son and herself. The call led Payne and Summers to the Metropolitan Inter-Faith Association (MIFA). With only \$54 left to their names, they were accepted for residency in MIFA's Estival Community transitional housing program, which provides support and advice for 100 formerly homeless families.

"I was a little concerned when I came to MIFA," she said. "I knew Cossitt (in the Peabody-Vance area) had a reputation as a bad neighborhood, and MIFA had all these rules. But then we met (case manager) Laura Terry, and I realized the Lord had provided again. He was watching over us. He was providing for us."

Terry recognized Payne's strong character right away. "I was impressed with her perseverance and her willingness to shelter her son from the problems in their

Kyle Summers ('08)

Kyle Summers' mother told him his job was to get the best education possible, and he beat some overwhelming odds along the way to do it.

lives," she said.

Summers offered to get a job during his mother's recovery, but she wouldn't hear of it. Payne wanted her son to have as normal a youth as he could, considering the circumstances.

"I told him he already had a job, and that was to get the best education possible," she said. "It was my job was to take care of the rest." She found a job as an administrative assistant for a manufacturing firm, and also became the resident manager at Idlewild Court, one of Estival Community's housing units.

"I was in their shoes and it makes it easy for me to understand what people who come to MIFA are going through," Payne said.

Payne admits that as a single parent, she's made some mistakes. But she says she's proud of the fact that her son has never been in trouble, "and I only got called to the school when it was time to see him pick up an award."

Summers entered CBU as a freshman in the fall of 2004 with a \$28,000 Lasallian academic scholarship—one of the school's highest awards, granted to only two freshmen each year.

"He's going to be a very good student," Jim Shannon, dean of student financial assistance, said. "He has a lot of initiative, which is what it takes."

Summers turned down scholarship offers from Lambuth University, the University of Tennessee, and Fisk University to remain close to home. He entered CBU with plans to attend veterinary school after his undergraduate studies.

He praises his mother for providing as best she could.

"It makes me feel very fortunate that someone like her cares, and that she gave up her life for me to have the opportunity to go to school and succeed," he said. "She means everything to me. She's all I've got, and she's all I really needed to succeed. With her support, I can do anything."

"I couldn't quit studying and give up. I had to keep trying."

After a year at CBU, Kyle Summers is older, wiser, and still striving—only this time in a much bigger pond.

"He grew up on me," Payne said of her son. "What a difference a year can make."

With his freshman year tidily behind him and a 3.5 GPA under his academic belt, Summers has lost most if not all the youthful pudginess of a high school stu-

dent. His face is leaner, more serious. Even his hair is different. Instead of the close-cropped look of his younger years, Summers' hair is longer and hipper. His posture is different too. He joined a fraternity and, although his major is still biology, he changed his focus from veterinary medicine to orthopedics.

He signed up to be the resident advisor (R.A.) on his floor at Rozier Hall. Now he's the one who will help ease transitions, answer questions, give directions, settle disputes, and act as "the beer police."

During his first year at CBU, Summers saw students quit. He saw them change directions, sometimes several times. He saw some neglect their studies all semester only to cram at the last minute. He learned as much about people as books.

He praises his mother for providing as best she could. "It makes me feel very fortunate that she gave up her life for me to have the opportunity to go to school and succeed. With her support, I can do anything."

"I had to adjust more than he did," his mother said. "When I took him to the dorms, I cried like he was 2,000 miles away instead of two."

Payne is still working as a resident manager in the housing program, but she also has a new job as a clerk at the Shelby County Sheriff's Department. Since she started working in law enforcement, she has processed a 19-year-old hauled in on his third felony arrest, a 24-year-old charged with first-degree murder, and another young man charged with seven counts of attempted murder—each count calling for \$1 million bond.

She said she's become only too aware that if she'd been less vigilant as a parent or too proud to seek help when she needed it, her son could very well be one of those men.

"It makes you think about a lot of things," she said. "Kyle could have taken a different route, struggling like we did, instead of sticking it out."

"I call him all the time to tell him how much I love him and how proud I am of him." ■

This article is adapted from two articles which originally appeared in Hope in Action, the magazine of the Metropolitan Inter-Faith Association.