

NEWS

Georgia student gives back after finding hope at cancer camp

Experience aims to help kids process parent's diagnosis.

By Sydney Shankman, Covering Poverty

When Leah Banko was 11, her father was diagnosed with double-hit lymphoma, a rare form of non-Hodgkin lymphoma. She recalls not understanding how severely cancer could impact someone until she knew someone directly affected by it.

"You're watching your biggest hero ... not able to promise their life to you," Banko said.

Her father's diagnosis was "a really big growing-up moment." With both parents frequently at the hospital, Banko said she was left to care for her younger brother, an experience common among children whose parents have cancer.

In 2015, about a year after her father's diagnosis, Banko and her family discovered Camp Kesem. Banko admits that she was hesitant at first, not wanting to attend a "cancer camp." After her first week, she felt as if she found her home.

"(Kesem) is home. It was absolutely life-changing for me," Banko said.

Kesem, a national organization with 120 chapters run out of colleges and universities nationwide, offers support throughout the year, but its main focus is Camp Kesem. Kesem provides a week of free, overnight summer camp designed to empower campers who have been impacted by a parent's cancer and create a fun and supportive community.

Camp Kesem at the University of Georgia sent 225 children to summer camp in 2024 and aims to grow that number in 2025.

Banko, now a fourth-year entertainment and media studies student at UGA, attended Camp Kesem for seven years. Her counselors were her heroes, giving her the kind of support she needed during her father's illness. She continues to return annually because of



Leah Banko holds a Camp Kesem sign as a child. Kesem provides a week of free, overnight summer camp designed to empower campers who have been impacted by a parent's cancer and create a fun and supportive community. COURTESY OF LEAH BANKO



Leah Banko, director of the UGA Kesem chapter, says Kesem is not about grief; it is meant to uplift and heal the children who attend. COURTESY OF SYDNEY SHANKMAN

an "intrinsic desire to help Kesem" after it helped her.

She volunteered as a counselor and served on the executive board for two years. As a counselor, she said, she saw children in the same position she once was in who blossomed during their time at camp. She now oversees a team of 24 coor-

dinators on the executive board who are in charge of communications, planning and fundraising related to Kesem. She works closely on counselor recruitment efforts that rely on the students at UGA. The recruitment and training process is rigorous, with more than 16 hours of in-person and



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online lessons.

"It makes me emotional and blows me away every single year, just how dedicated our volunteers are," Banko said.

UGA's chapter has a fundraising goal of \$190,000, which is how Kesem ensures its services are free for campers. Banko and the other directors work with retailers in Athens to collect supplies and reach out to donors.

Through and beyond the camp, Kesem continues its support during the year. They hold monthly camper reunions and family events. Kesem sends care packages and birthday cards to all of its campers as a reminder that they are not alone.

"Our tagline is 'supporting children through and beyond a parent's cancer,'" Banko said. "We want to make sure that support doesn't just stick with them over the summer, but really throughout the entire year."

The most crucial role for Banko is making sure her campers feel supported. She says Kesem is not about grief; it is meant to uplift and heal the children who attend it, just as it did for her.

"Everybody there is just so connected, and they share their stories, and you just see some of the strongest, bravest little 6-year-olds you've ever met," she said.

HOWTOHELP: For more information on Camp Kesem, go to kesem.org/chapters/georgia. To provide supplies or donate, reach out to uga@kesem.org or donate@kesem.org or kesem.org/team/608287.

Woman gets life in egg prank that ended in shooting

Prosecutors: Two suspects went to work after killing.

By David Aaro david.aaro@ajc.com

After threatening to fight a woman over Instagram drama last year, Sydney Maughon decided to visit her Spalding County home with the intention of egging it and attacking her, prosecutors said.

But when she arrived with two friends, one of whom had a handgun, Maughon became "enraged," prosecutors said. She had just discovered that Jonathan Tyler Gilbert, a man with whom she had a relationship, was at the woman's house without her knowledge, Griffin Judicial Circuit District Attorney Marie G. Broder said in a statement.

After Gilbert had eggs and rocks thrown at him, he was seen on video running to the rear of the home. Maughon then urged one of the other two people to "shoot him, shoot him" upon getting into a vehicle, the DA's office said. The other suspects were identified as Jeremy Munson, the man with the gun, and Mackenzie Davenport, who prosecutors said threw eggs and rocks along with Maughon.

"(Seconds later), Mr. Gilbert then approaches the vehicle, unarmed, and Ms. Maughon takes Mr. Munson's firearm and shoots Mr. Gilbert two times," prosecutors said.

On Nov. 20, Maughon pleaded guilty to malice murder in the killing, which officials deemed senseless and tragic. Spalding Superior Court Judge Ben Coker then sentenced her to life in prison with the possibility of parole. Maughon cannot be considered for parole until she has served "every day of at least 30 years," Broder said.

On July 3, 2023, the three suspects went to egg the home along Dobbins Mills due to an "ongoing lovers

quarrel," according to officials. When Gilbert, who was visiting the home, saw what they were doing to it, he came outside unarmed and confronted them, Sheriff Darrell Dix said.

The suspects ran back to the vehicle and Maughon, who was a backseat passenger, pulled out a firearm and shot Gilbert as he approached, Dix said. Officials said Gilbert was left in the middle of the road and was found by police responding to the 911 call.

According to prosecutors, Davenport immediately ran for help and got someone to call 911, while Maughon and Munson drove back to the home they shared with Maughon's parents. After telling her father what happened, the pair gave him the handgun, which he hid in a closet, the DA's office said.

"The father then tells them not to call the police, but to let the police find them," prosecutors said. "Maughon and Munson then go to work at Pizza Hut."

Maughon and Munson, who were both 18 at the time, were eventually found through Davenport's help after she left her shoes and cellphone in the car. Prosecutors said Davenport allowed deputies to track her phone, which led to their capture. The car and the suspected gun used in the crime were eventually found at an unnamed residence, officials said.

According to the DA's office, Davenport, who was 19 at the time, pleaded guilty to two misdemeanor charges, while Munson has "yet to resolve his case."

"This case is absolutely senseless and tragic. Ms. Maughon coldly, callously and maliciously shot and killed a young man that had nothing to do with the drama she wanted to create with this other female," Senior ADA Audrey Holliday said in a statement. "She and Mr. Munson then left him in the street to die and went to work."

OBITUARY

Founder of popular Westside eatery dies

Helen Harden sold recently reopened Bankhead Seafood.

By Mike Jordan mike.jordan@ajc.com

The management of Bankhead Seafood announced on social media that Helen Brown Harden, founder of the longtime Westside restaurant known for selling platters of fried fish and hush puppies in generous portions, died Sunday evening.

"It is with heavy hearts that we say goodbye to a true Atlanta legend, Mrs. Helen Harden, affectionately known to the neighborhood as 'Mama,'" the post reads.

"We extend our deepest condolences to the Harden family as we join in mourning this extraordinary woman who graced our lives and community with her unmatched kindness and love. For over 50 years, Mrs. Harden nourished the city of Atlanta, both with her cooking and her boundless spirit. Her unwavering dedication and compassion touched countless lives, leaving an indelible mark on all who had the privilege of knowing her.

"As we celebrate her remarkable life and mourn her passing, let us hold tightly to the joy, love and inspiration she brought to so many. Her legacy lives on, especially on the corner of Bankhead and Westlake ... where her presence shaped the heart of our community.

"We are committed to carrying her vision forward. Bankhead Seafood will remain the warm, welcoming place she built, a true testament to her dedication and love for the people of Atlanta.



Atlanta rapper Killer Mike, part of an ownership group that purchased Bankhead Seafood, poses with former owner Helen Harden before the official reopening in November. The restaurant had closed in 2018 after 50 years in operation. HYOSUB SHIN/AJC

"Atlanta, thank you for standing with us during this difficult time. Together, we honor Mrs. Harden's life, her family, and her enduring contributions.

"May we continue to cherish the beautiful memories she leaves behind and strive to reflect her incredible legacy in all that we do."

Harden, who attended Bankhead Seafood's opening, was said to always insist on high-quality fish and fair prices for customers in the surrounding community. Patrons were known to wait in long lines at the popular restaurant for carryout boxes of fried pollock.

"Ms. Helen Harden, when she would pack those boxes, the people who were coming in here were working-class folk. My grandparents would get a couple boxes and feed seven or eight kids. That affordability means some-

thing," Killer Mike said in a story on Bankhead Seafood's opening.

The restaurant was made famous by a notable shout-out on the classic Atlanta hip-hop song "Soul Food" by Goodie Mob.

Harden was proud to have lived to see the reimagined restaurant open its doors weeks ago.

"I feel wonderful, wonderful, wonderful. I just wondered if I was going to live long enough to see it come to reality, but since God was good, here I am, and everything is just what I dreamed of," Harden told the AJC.

The Atlanta Journal-Constitution has requested comment from Killer Mike and T.I., who are part of an ownership group that purchased the restaurant from Harden before reopening Nov. 14.

The office of Atlanta Mayor Andre Dickens released a

statement on Harden's death.

"I extend my heartfelt condolences to the family and friends mourning the passing of Ms. Helen Brown Harden, the visionary founder of Bankhead Seafood," Dickens said. "For over 50 years, she gifted our community a culinary treasure that grew into a beloved institution. As we recently celebrated Mike and T.I.'s reopening of Bankhead Seafood, we are reminded of Ms. Harden's contribution to our city. Her legacy will endure, not only through her food but also in the hearts of all who were touched by her vision and dedication to serving our community."

The restaurant said updates on Ms. Harden's memorial service would be shared on Bankhead Seafood's social media pages. It also invited followers to share memories of the restaurant's founder in comments.

Holiday traffic toll in Georgia: 17 dead

Number of fatalities down slightly from 2023, state reports.

By Alexis Stevens alexis.stevens@ajc.com

Crashes killed 17 people across the state during the Thanksgiving holiday weekend, the Georgia Department of Public Safety said Monday.

That's down from the 2023 holiday, when 23 people were killed between Wednesday at 6 p.m. and 11:59 p.m. Sunday. This year, a record number of travelers were expected to make road trips for the holiday, and law enforcement agencies pledged to be out in full force.

Several deadly crashes remained under investigation in metro Atlanta, including in Fulton, DeKalb, Gwinnett and Cobb counties.

Investigators believe alcohol was a factor in a deadly head-on collision in Gwinnett County on Wednesday evening, according to Lawrenceville police. The fatal crash happened around 6 p.m. on Buford Drive at Hurricane Shoals.

A northbound vehicle on Buford Drive crossed over into the southbound lanes and struck a Nissan Rogue head-on, killing the SUV's driver, police said. The driver suspected of causing the crash and several passen-

gers were injured but survived, police said.

Anyone who witnessed the crash or might have any other information is asked to contact police at 770-670-5135 or by emailing the investigator at TCoble@LawrencevillePD.com.

Early Saturday, a man walking outside of a marked crosswalk was killed in a hit-and-run crash in Cobb County, police said.

The crash occurred on Pat Mell Road, west of Benson Avenue, at 4:31 a.m., Cobb police Sgt. Eric Smith said. A vehicle traveling west struck the man, who died at the scene.

Anyone with information on either the driver or the vehicle involved is asked to contact the Cobb police STEP Unit at 770-499-3987.

Outside of metro Atlanta, a multicar crash on Thanksgiving Day killed two people in Augusta near the intersection of Windsor Spring and Willis Foreman roads, The Augusta Chronicle reported.

One driver died at the scene and another driver died at the hospital, according to the report.

State troopers from various posts around the state were called upon to investigate several fatal crashes. The posts were at Forsyth, Rincon, Thomasville, LaGrange, Athens, Valdosta, Reidsville and Dodge County, according to the state patrol.

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