

Feature Writing

State Meet • 2019



You are a reporter for the Leaguetown **Press**, the student newspaper of Leaguetown High School.

From the given information, write a **feature story** as you would for the high school newspaper. You may use statements attributed to individuals as **direct or indirect quotes**. You may not change the meaning of a statement.

You have **one hour**.

Do not write your name or the name of your school on this sheet or your entry.

Put your number NOT YOUR NAME on your paper.

Leaguetown High School has an enrollment of 2,850 students in grades 9-12. In March, senior Harry Parker received an acceptance letter to Harvard University, which included a full-ride scholarship offer.

Harry has not had the typical teen life. His father died when he was in third grade, leaving behind Harry and his mother, who was a high school dropout. By the time Harry was in middle school, he and his mother were homeless, living in shelters and sleeping at various friends' houses when they could. Then, when Harry was a freshman in high school, his mother was diagnosed with Stage 4 breast cancer. She died at the beginning of his sophomore year. After her death, Harry lived in a tent for a few weeks in Tarrytown Park until a Leaguetown police officer found him. Officer David Stephens took Harry to the police station where Harry told the officer his story. Moved by Harry's determination, Stephens offered Harry a room at his house. Harry accepted and still lives with Stephens today.

Regardless of where he was living — in a shelter or a car or the park — Harry attended school and thrived. By his freshman year, Harry was taking four Pre-Advanced Placement classes and earning straight A's. That pattern continued for Harry for his four years in high school. He took as many AP classes as he could throughout high school. Currently, he is ranked fifth in his class of 650.

Yesterday, Harry accepted the Harvard offer, and next Wednesday, May 8, he and Stephens will go to court to sign adoption papers. You are writing for the issue of the Press to be distributed on Monday, May 6.

■ HARRY PARKER, senior

"Growing up poor and homeless was tough, but losing my mom was the hardest thing I've ever been through. Everything my mom did in life was for me. She worked as a waitress in dingy restaurants and dive bars because that was the only place she could get a job. She worked every shift she could just so we would have enough money to eat. She sold her wedding ring to buy me a trombone for band. My mom had a rough childhood and ran away at 14. That's why she never finished high school. She spent her life apologizing to me. She said I always deserved better than what she provided. What she gave me, though, was more valuable than money, more important than nice clothes, more lasting than a fancy home. She loved me, and I loved her. She told me that I could achieve anything, and she knew I would get into Harvard if I worked hard. She believed in me. She was the best mom I could have ever dreamed of, and there is not a day that goes by that I don't think of her.

"When my mom died, I wasn't sure if I would reach my dream of going to Harvard. I felt lost, and I didn't know if I had the strength to do it by myself.

■ HARRY PARKER (cont.)

“My mom is the one who told me about Harvard. When I was in first grade, we used to watch ‘Boston Legal’ together. She told me all the lawyers on that show went to Harvard. That’s when I set my goal to go to Harvard. I wanted to be just like them.

“But I didn’t know if I could do it without her. Then I met Officer Stephens. I really thought he was going to arrest me when he found me in the park. I was trespassing, I guess, but I didn’t have anywhere else to go. Instead, he gave me a home.

“I am so thankful for him, and I know my mom is, too. When David asked if he could adopt me, I kind of thought he was joking. I mean, I’m a teenager. David’s kids are grown, and he’s a grandpa. When I finally figured out he was serious, I was pretty speechless. I managed to get out a ‘Hell, yes’ before I started to get all emotional. On Wednesday, we are signing the papers at the courthouse, and then all of David’s family — I guess I can say my family now — are coming over for a barbecue. It definitely will be a day to celebrate.

“Most kids at school don’t know my story. I’m a private person, and my story is not one that makes you popular or attracts a lot of friends. Luckily, with 2,000-plus students, it was easy to go unnoticed. Some of my teachers knew about my mom dying. I think my freshman counselor knew we struggled with homelessness, but I never told anyone that I had nowhere to go after my mom died. I didn’t want anyone’s pity and, frankly, I was embarrassed. I don’t exactly have a lot of friends. My lifestyle didn’t allow for that. Until my sophomore year, my mom was my best friend.

“David convinced me to share my story. He said maybe I could be an inspiration to another student who is poor or struggling with other issues. Maybe I can be. That would be pretty awesome. I guess my advice would be, ‘Never give up.’ That has been my mantra throughout my life. My mom used to say that was our family creed: ‘We are fighters. We never give up.’ There were plenty of times I wanted to give up, but after my mom died, I could hear her voice whispering to me. ‘Never give up.’ I didn’t because I didn’t want to let her down. My success is her success.”

■ DAVID STEPHENS, police officer

“When I found Harry in that tent two years ago, I never expected to see a teenager. I figured it was an old homeless guy — not a 15-year-old kid. After hearing Harry’s story, how could I not help him? He’s an amazing kid who was dealt a bad hand. The year before Harry came to live with me, I lost my wife of 30 years to breast cancer. When Harry said his mom died of breast cancer, I knew somehow those two ladies conspired in heaven to bring us together.

“I am beyond proud of Harry for his Harvard scholarship, but I wasn’t surprised. Harvard would have been crazy not to accept Harry and give him the scholarship. He’s the hardest working kid I’ve ever met, and he’s faced more than a few challenges along the way. The adoption thing was my idea. I wanted to make it official, but these papers won’t change much. Harry is and always will be our family. My own kids love him and are thrilled about Wednesday.”

■ JESSICA MARTIN, senior English teacher

“I learned about Harry’s struggles when I read his college essay. I had no idea. I knew he had lost his mother, but I had no idea about everything else. It made me so sad when I read his essay, but the essay is also incredibly uplifting. Harvard is lucky to get Harry. When he told me it was the only school he was applying to, I encouraged him to have a backup, but Harry didn’t want to go to any other school. He told me, ‘This is it. This is my goal.’ Well, he definitely achieved that goal.”

■ ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

Harry is the only student in Leaguetown history to receive a full-ride scholarship to Harvard University. Two other seniors were accepted, but they did not receive scholarships.

DO NOT DISTRIBUTE TO STUDENTS BEFORE OR DURING CONTEST!

STATE • 2019

FEATURE WRITING CONTEST TIPS AND SAMPLE STORY

Contest Director: Give one copy to each judge to use during critique/judging. Also, staple one copy of the contest and one copy of the contest tips to each student's returned entry. The purpose of the tips is to provide immediate feedback to students. However, it is not meant to replace written comments from the judge.

1. Figure out what the story is about and its theme or focus. This story is about a senior who overcame adversities and was accepted to Harvard.

2. The lead of a feature story must grab the reader's attention. It does not have to be a certain length or include the 5Ws and H. It should set a scene and get the reader into the story. Although you have freedom to describe the scene as you think it might have existed, try to stay as close to the copy as you can. Some judges will not want you to wander off the subject too much.

Senior Harry Parker is no stranger to adversity. His father died when he was in third grade, leaving behind Parker and his mother, who was a high school dropout, to fend for themselves. By the time Harry was in middle school, the two of them were in and out of homeless shelters. Then, during Harry's freshman year, his mom was diagnosed with Stage 4 breast cancer and passed away the following year.

"Growing up poor and homeless was tough, but losing my mom was the hardest thing I've ever been through," he said.

Harry said his mom lived her life for him — from waitressing in dingy diners to selling her wedding ring to buy Harry a trombone for band.

"She spent her life apologizing to me," he said. "She said I always deserved better than what she provided. What she gave me, though, was better than money, better than nice clothes, better than a fancy home. She loved me, and I loved her. She told me that I could achieve anything."

The lead possibilities are endless.

3. Once you get past the lead, make sure you include a nut graph. It tells the reader what the story is going to be about. Follow the nut graph with a direct quote and then go into the transition/quote formula.

nut graph

Harry believed his mom and set his sights high — Harvard University. To achieve his goal, he thrived in school, regardless of whether he was living in a homeless shelter or sleeping in a car. In high school, he continued his success and took as many Advanced Placement courses as he could, and receiving A's. Currently he is ranked fifth out of 650 seniors.

In March, Harry reaped the rewards of his hard work. He was accepted to Harvard University and received a full-ride scholarship, making him the first student in the school's history to receive the honor. He accepted his admission last week.

4. After you get past the nut graph, the rest of the story can tell itself through the use of the transition/quote formula.

Be sure you attribute after the quote, or at least after the first sentence. An attribution should be: subject of attribution followed by the verb of attribution (“Julia said,” not “said Julia”). Don’t stack quotes. You need a transition sentence between direct quotes, and that transition sentence should provide facts or data. Also, make sure transitions do not repeat information told in a direct quote.

transition/story-telling

When he was a sophomore and his mom died, Harry wasn’t sure he would reach his goal of going to Harvard.

direct quote

“I felt lost, and I didn’t know if I had the strength to do it by myself,” he said.

transition/story-telling

That’s when fate, kismet — call it what you want — stepped in. Harry met Officer David Stephens, and his life changed dramatically.

After his mother’s death, Harry had nowhere to go, so he pitched a tent in Tarrytown Park. That’s where Officer Stephens found him.

direct quote

“I was trespassing, I guess,” Harry said.

5. Always use third person. Don’t say “our student” or “our Harry Parker.” Also, do not editorialize. For instance, you should not say “He is an amazing guy.” These statements are personal opinion and should not be made in a feature story.

6. Use the verb “said” as the verb of attribution unless you have a very good reason not to. For example, if someone asks something, use the verb “asked.” If someone added something, you could use “added.” Otherwise, use “said.”

7. Finally, look for a strong quote to use as a closing statement. It should give the reader a sense of satisfaction or resolution.

While pushing for his goal, Harry’s mantra has been something his mom always told him: “Never give up.”

“There were plenty of times I wanted to give up, but after my mom died, I could hear her voice in my ear every day and every night. ‘Never give up,’” he said. “I didn’t because I didn’t want to let her down. My success is her success.”

SAMPLE STORY

Senior Harry Parker is no stranger to adversity. His father died when he was in third grade, leaving behind Parker and his mother, who was a high school dropout, to fend for themselves. By the time Harry was in middle school, the two of them were in and out of homeless shelters. Then, during Harry's freshman year, his mom was diagnosed with Stage 4 breast cancer and passed away the following year.

"Growing up poor and homeless was tough, but losing my mom was the hardest thing I've ever been through," he said.

Harry said his mom lived her life for him — from waitressing in dingy diners to selling her wedding ring to buy Harry a trombone for band.

"She spent her life apologizing to me," he said. "She said I always deserved better than what she provided. What she gave me, though, was more valuable than money, more important than nice clothes, more lasting than a fancy home. She loved me, and I loved her. She told me that I could achieve anything."

Harry believed his mom and set his sights high — Harvard University. To achieve his goal, he thrived in school, regardless of whether he was living in a homeless shelter or sleeping in a car. In high school, he continued his success and took as many Advanced Placement courses as he could and received A's. Currently he is ranked fifth out of 650 seniors.

In March, Harry reaped the rewards of his hard work. He was accepted to Harvard University and received a full-ride scholarship, making him the first student in the school's history to receive the honor. He accepted his admission last week.

When he was a sophomore and his mom died, Harry wasn't sure he would reach his goal of going to Harvard.

"I felt lost, and I didn't know if I had the strength to do it by myself," he said.

That's when fate, kismet — call it what you want — stepped in. After his mother's death, Harry had nowhere to go, so he pitched a tent in Tarrytown Park. That's where Officer David Stephens found him.

"I was trespassing, I guess," Harry said.

Harry thought Officer Stephens was going to arrest him. Instead, he offered Harry a home, and next week, he will adopt Harry and officially make him part of his family.

"After hearing Harry's story, how could I not help him?" Stephens said. "He's an amazing kid who has been dealt a bad hand. The year before Harry came to live with me I lost my wife of 30 years to breast cancer. When Harry said his mom died of breast cancer, I knew somehow those two ladies conspired in Heaven to bring us together."

This Wednesday after living together for two years, the duo will make a trip to the courthouse to sign the adoption papers.

"I wanted to make it official, but these papers won't change much," Stephens said. "Harry is and always will be our family."

Harry said he thought Stephens was joking at first when he asked to adopt him.

"I mean, I'm a teenager," he said. "Dave's kids are grown, and he's a grandpa. When I finally figured out he was serious, I was pretty speechless. I managed to get out a 'Hell, yes' before I started to get all emotional."

Because he keeps to himself, Harry said not many others at school know his story.

"Dave convinced me to share my story," he said. "He said maybe I could be an inspiration to another student who is poor or struggling with other issues. Maybe I can be. That would be pretty awesome."

Senior English teacher Jessica Martin said she learned about Harry's struggles after reading his college essay.

"Harvard is lucky to get Harry," Martin said. "When he told me it was the only school he was applying to, I encouraged him to have a backup, but Harry didn't want to go to any other school. He told me, 'This is it. This is my goal.' Well, he definitely achieved that goal."

While pushing for his goal, Harry's mantra has been something his mom always told him: "Never give up."

"There were plenty of times I wanted to give up, but after my mom died, I could hear her voice whispering to me. 'Never give up,'" he said. "I didn't because I didn't want to let her down. My success is her success."

2019 Feature Writing CHAMPIONS

1A Champion

Landry Neal, Savoy High School

Senior Harry Parker knows many definitions of the word home. When he was in third grade, after his father died, he knew the dingy tile of a homeless shelter, and the arms of his hardworking mother. He has known the couch of a friend and the backseat of a car. When he was a sophomore, and his mother lost a battle to breast cancer, he learned the isolation of a homemade tent pitched in a park. However many homes Harry has known, he never expected to find a home with a complete stranger — let alone with the police officer who caught him trespassing.

Harry had been living in the park for a few weeks by the time Officer David Stephens found him. Instead of arresting him, Stephens invited him to move in. Harry accepted, and has been living in Stephen's house ever since. Harry is now a senior, and he will be attending Harvard this fall on a full-ride scholarship. Aside from his academic success, Harry has gained a family in Stephens. This Wednesday, May 8, Stephens will officially adopt Harry in court, and they will celebrate after with a big family barbeque.

"When I found Harry in that tent two years ago, I never expected to see a teenager," Stephens said. "I figured it was an old homeless guy — not a 15-year-old kid. After hearing Harry's story, how could I not help him? The year Harry came to live with me, I lost my wife of 30 years to breast cancer. When Harry said his mom died of breast cancer, I knew somehow those two ladies conspired in heaven to bring us together."

Despite Harry's tumultuous home life growing up, he has always worked hard in school. He learned this from a young age, inspired by his mother.

"Everything my mom did in life was for me," Harry said. "She worked as a waitress in dingy restaurants and dive bars because that was the only place she could get a job. She worked every shift she could just so we could have enough money to eat. She always said I deserved better than what she provided. What she gave me, though, was more valuable than money, more important than clothes, more lasting than a fancy home. She loved me, and I loved her. She told me that I could achieve anything, and she knew I would get into Harvard if I worked hard. She believed in me."

Harry's mother is the reason Harry set his sights on Harvard in the first place. Growing up, they watched *Boston Legal* together, and his mom told him all the lawyers on the show went to Harvard.

"I wanted to be just like them," Harry said. "But I didn't know if I could do it without her. When my mom died ... I felt lost, and I didn't know if I had the strength to do it by myself. Then I met Officer Stephens. I really thought he was going to arrest me when he found me in the park. I was trespassing, I guess, but I didn't have anywhere else to go. Instead, he gave me a home."

Officer Stephens's biological kids are adults, and he even has grandchildren. Regardless of this, he and Harry both consider each other family.

"I am so thankful for him, and I know my mom is, too," Harry said. "When David asked if he could adopt me, I kind of thought he was joking. When I finally figured out he was serious, I was pretty speechless. I managed to get out a 'Hell, yes' before I started to get all emotional."

As far as Officer Stephens goes, he is proud of Harry's academic success, but not surprised.

"Harvard would have been crazy not to accept Harry and give him the scholarship," Stephens said. "He's the hardest working kid I've ever met, and he's faced more than a few challenges along the way. The adoption thing was my idea. I wanted to make it official, but these papers won't change much. Harry is and always will be my family."

Harry is proud of himself, too, but he wants to use his story to inspire other students who had a rough start in life or are facing other challenges.

"I guess my advice would be 'never give up,'" Harry said. "That has been my mantra throughout my life. My mom used to say that was our family creed: 'We are fighters. We never give up.' There were plenty of times I wanted to give up, but after my mom died, I could hear her voice whispering to me. 'Never give up.' I didn't because I didn't want to let her down. My success is her success."

2A Champion

Brooke Wheelock, Mason High School

Many people view their high school years as the best time of their lives—their "glory days," if you will. This was most definitely not the case for senior Harry Parker, as he was an orphan living in a makeshift tent home in the park by the time he was a sophomore. However, Harry's glory days are looming in the future as he trades in his homelessness for a home at the prestigious Harvard University and his parentless status for a loving, adoptive father.

"When my mom died, I wasn't sure if I would reach my dream of going to Harvard," Harry said. "I felt lost, and I didn't know if I had the strength to do it by myself."

Harry's father died when he was in third grade, leaving behind Harry and his mother, who was a high school dropout. At the beginning of Harry's sophomore year, his mother lost her battle to Stage 4 breast cancer. After her death, Harry lived in a tent at Tarrytown

Park until Police Officer David Stephens discovered him. When Stephens heard Harry's story, he offered Harry a room at his house, where Harry has continued to live the past two years. In March, Harry received an acceptance letter to Harvard, which included a full-ride scholarship offer. Yesterday, he accepted that offer. Harry and Stephens will go to court to sign adoption papers on Wednesday.

"When David asked if he could adopt me, I kind of thought he was joking," Harry said. "When I finally figured out he was serious, I was pretty speechless. I managed to get out a 'Hell, yes' before I started to get emotional."

Harry admits that growing up in and out of homelessness was hard, but losing his mother was the hardest thing he had to face.

"Everything my mom did in life was for me," Harry said. "She worked every shift she could just so we would have enough money to eat. She sold her wedding ring to buy me a trombone for band."

Harry's mother had a rough childhood, which caused her to run away from home at 14 years old, leaving her without a high school diploma.

"She spent her life apologizing to me," Harry said. "She said I always deserved more than what she provided. What she gave me, though, was more valuable than money, more important than nice clothes, more lasting than a fancy home. She loved me, and I loved her."

When Harry was in first grade, his mom told him about Harvard, which is when he set his goal to attend the university.

"She told me that I could achieve anything, and I knew I would get into Harvard if I worked hard," Harry said. "She believed in me. She was the best mom I could have ever dreamed of, and there is not a day that goes by that I don't think of her."

Harry admits that after he lost his mom, he was unsure if he could make it to Harvard without her encouragement.

"Then I met Officer Stephens," Harry said. "I really thought he was going to arrest me when he found me in the park. I was trespassing, I guess, but I didn't have anywhere else to go. Instead he gave me a home."

Stephens admits that he did not foresee finding Harry in that tent, but after hearing his story, he knew he had to help him.

"He's an amazing kid who was dealt a bad hand," Stephens said. "The year before Harry came to live with me, I lost my wife of 30 years to breast cancer. When Harry said his mom died of breast cancer, I knew somehow those two ladies conspired in heaven to bring us together."

Harry had chosen to keep his personal hardships private from his peers at school, but Stephens encouraged him to share his story.

"He said maybe I could be an inspiration to another student struggling with other issues," Harry said. "I guess my advice would be, 'Never give up.' That has been my mantra throughout my life. My mom used to say that was our family creed: 'We are fighters. We never give up.'"

Jessica Martin, senior English teacher, was among the people unaware of Harry's situation. She learned about his hardships when she read his college essay.

"When he told me [Harvard] was the only school he was applying to, I encouraged him to have a backup, but Harry didn't want to go to any other school," Martin said. "He told me, 'This is it. This is my goal.' Well, he definitely achieved his goal."

After signing the adoption papers on Wednesday, Stephens' family plans to welcome the newest member of their family —Harry — with a barbecue celebration.

"The adoption thing was my idea," Stephens said. "I wanted to make it official, but these papers won't change much. Harry is and always will be our family. My own kids love him and are thrilled about Wednesday."

3A Champion

Avery Tyson, Gateway High School

When Officer David Stephens entered a tent in Tarrytown Park two years ago, he expected to see a homeless man. Instead, he found an orphaned teenager heartbroken from the recent death of his mother.

Now, that same teenager, Harry Parker, is preparing for both adoption and a fully-paid-for Harvard University education.

For most of his life, senior Harry Parker lived in shelters and on friends' couches. After his mother died from Stage 4 breast cancer sophomore year, he lived alone in a tent until discovered by Officer Stevens, who took the boy under his wing. Despite tough conditions, Harry remained dedicated to his studies, is ranked fifth in his class, and recently accepted a full-ride scholarship to Harvard, a dream of his since first grade.

"[My mom and I] used to watch 'Boston Legal' together. She told me all the lawyers on that show went to Harvard," Harry said. "That's when I set my goal to go [there]. I wanted to be just like them."

Harry's mother was a pillar of unwavering support throughout his life. He said she always believed in him.

"She told me I could achieve anything, and she knew I would get into Harvard if I worked hard," Harry said. "She was the best mom I could have ever dreamed of."

When his mother died, though Harry said he wasn't sure if he could reach his dream without her.

"Growing up poor and homeless was tough, but losing my mom was the hardest thing I've ever been through," he said "I felt lost."

Thankfully, Officer Stephens was there to provide the help Harry needed. When he found the boy in Tarrytown Park, he offered him a place to stay.

"After hearing Harry's story, how could I not help him?" Stephens said. "He's an amazing kid who was dealt a bad hand."

Before meeting Stephens, Harry had never discussed his personal life with anyone due to fear of embarrassment, but Stephens convinced the boy to share his story.

"He said maybe I could be an inspiration to another student who is poor or struggling with other issues," Harry said. "Maybe I can be."

Stephens said he is beyond proud of Harry for receiving the Harvard scholarship, but he is not surprised.

“Harvard would have been crazy not to accept Harry and give him the scholarship,” Stephens said. “He’s the hardest working kid I’ve ever met, and he’s faced more than a few challenges along the way.”

Getting into such a prestigious university is astounding enough, but Harry is experiencing more excitement: he will become Stephens’s adopted son this Wednesday, May 8.

“When David asked if he could adopt me, I kind of thought he was joking,” Harry said. “When I finally figured out he was serious... I managed to get out a ‘Hell, yes’ before I started to get all emotional.”

The pair will sign the papers at the courthouse before returning home to a barbecue celebration.

“Harry is and always will be our family,” Stephens said. “My own kids love him and are thrilled about Wednesday.”

Although Harry hasn’t had it easy, he was able to persevere and achieve his goals by working hard for his mother and reminding himself to never give up.

“That has been my mantra throughout my life,” he said. “After my mom died, I could hear her voice whispering to me. ‘Never give up.’ I didn’t because I didn’t want to let her down. My success is her success.”

4A Champion

Sarah Crowder, Argyle High School

“Never give up. Never give up.”

This mantra ran through senior Harry Parker’s head after his father died, when he was sleeping in shelters, and when his best friend, his mom, passed. And now, years of persevering are finally paying off.

Following the death of his parents and a bout of homelessness, Parker was given a home by police officer David Stephens. In March, Parker received a full ride to Harvard University and on Wednesday, he will be adopted by Stephens.

“Growing up poor and homeless was tough,” Parker said. “But losing my mom was the hardest thing I’ve ever been through. Everything my mom did in life was for me. She said I always deserved better than what she provided. What she gave me, though, was more valuable than money, more important than nice clothes, more lasting than a fancy home. She loved me, and I loved her. She told me that I could achieve anything, and she knew that I would get into Harvard if I worked hard.”

Parker and his mother, a high school dropout, were alone and homeless after his father died. After Parker’s mother died his sophomore year of Stage 4 breast cancer, he was sleeping in a tent in Tarrytown Park until Stephens came across him.

“When I found Harry in that tent two years ago, I never expected to see a teenager,” Stephens said. “After hearing Harry’s story, how could I not help him? He’s an amazing kid who was dealt a bad hand.”

Parker was lost after his mom died and did not know if he could reach his goals without her until he met Stephens.

“I am beyond proud of Harry for this Harvard scholarship, but I wasn’t surprised,” Stephens said. “Harvard would have been crazy not to accept and give him the scholarship. He’s the hardest working kid I’ve ever met. and he’s faced more than a few challenges along the way.”

Despite all of the hardships in Parker’s life, he worked tirelessly in school, earning straight A’s and being ranked fifth out of 650, while keeping his story under wraps.

“I learned about Harry’s struggles when I read his college essay,” senior English teacher Jessica Martin said. “I knew he had lost his mother, but I had no idea about everything else. Harvard is lucky to get Harry. When he told me it was the only school he was applying to, I encouraged him have a backup, but Harry didn’t want to go to any other school. He told me ‘This is it. This is my goal,’”

Stephens gave Parker a new home and family, and the push to share his journey to inspire other struggling students.

“When David asked if he could adopt me, I kind of thought he was joking,” Parker said. “When I finally figured out he was serious, I was pretty speechless. I managed to get out a ‘Hell, yes’ before I started to get all emotional. On Wednesday, we are signing the papers at the courthouse, and then all of David’s family — I guess I can say my family now — are coming over for a barbeque. It definitely will be a day to celebrate.”

5A Champion

TOPS IN TEXAS

Bailey Spencer, Lindale High School

He is alone. If he closes his eyes, it is almost like his mother is right there with him in the tent. He hears a faint whisper.

‘Never give up.’ The mantra repeats over and over in his head. ‘We are fighters. Never give up.’

In the beginning of his sophomore year, senior Harry Parker lost his mom to breast cancer and was taken in by police officer David Stevens. Parker received an acceptance letter and a full-ride scholarship to Harvard University, and on May 8, he and Stevens will go to the courthouse to sign adoption papers.

“When my mom died, I wasn’t sure if I would reach my dream of going to Harvard,” Parker said. “I felt lost, and I didn’t know if I had the strength to do it myself.”

Parker’s father died when he was in third grade, leaving behind Parker and his mother, who was a high school dropout. By the time Parker was in middle school, he and his mother were homeless.

"She spent her life apologizing to me," Parker said. "She said I always deserved better than what she provided. What she gave me, though, was more valuable than money, more important than nice clothes, more lasting than a fancy home. She loved me, and I loved her."

They lived in shelters, and when they had the opportunity, they lived at various friends' houses. His mother worked every shift she could as a waitress in dingy restaurants and dive bars, and when he was 14, she sold her wedding ring to buy Parker a trombone for band.

"She told me that I could achieve anything, and she knew I would get into Harvard if I worked hard," Parker said. "She believed in me. She was the best mom I could have ever dreamed of, and there is not a day that goes by that I don't think of her."

When Parker was a freshman in high school, his mother was diagnosed with stage 4 breast cancer. After she died a year later, he lived in a tent for a few weeks in Tarrytown Park until Stephens found him.

"I really thought he was going to arrest me when he found me in the park," Parker said. "I was trespassing, I guess, but I didn't have anywhere else to go. Instead, he gave me a home."

Stephens took Parker to the police station where Parker told him his story. Moved by Parker's determination, Stephens offered a room in his house.

"He's an amazing kid who was dealt a bad hand," Stephens said. "The year before Harry came to live with me, I lost my wife of 30 years to breast cancer. When Harry said his mom died of breast cancer, I knew somehow these two ladies conspired in heaven to bring us together."

Despite struggling with homelessness and poverty throughout his life, Parker attended school and thrived. By his freshman year, he was taking four Pre-Advanced Placement classes and earning straight A's. That pattern of success continued all four years of high school, and currently, he is ranked fifth in his class of 650.

"I learned about Harry's struggles when I read his college essay," senior English teacher Jessica Martin said. "I had no idea. When he told me it was the only school he was applying to, I encouraged him to have a backup, but Harry didn't want to go to any other school. He told me, 'This is it. This is my goal.' Well, he definitely achieved that goal."

Parker's hard work and determination paid off. While two other seniors were accepted, Parker is the only student in Leaguetown history to receive a full-ride scholarship to Harvard University.

"My mom used to say that was our family creed: 'We are fighters. We never give up,'" Parker said. "There were plenty of times I wanted to give up, but after my mom died, I could hear her voice whispering to me. 'Never give up.' I didn't because I didn't want to let her down. My success is her success."

6A Champion

Nichole Bresee, Mansfield High School

Growing up, senior Harry Parker never thought it was possible to feel this much joy at once. For him, life consisted of mourning over a lost home and parents, not celebrating a college acceptance letter or an upcoming adoption. But as he stands next to his soon-to-be adopted father and gets ready to eventually accept the two greatest offers in his life, he finds himself so elated that he never gave up on anything—especially himself.

After enduring a life of hardships and tribulations, including the death of both parents and homelessness, Parker not only received a full-ride scholarship to Harvard University, but found his own new family in Officer David Stephens. The Stephens family is set to adopt him this Wednesday.

"When David asked if he could adopt me, I kind of thought he was joking," Parker said. "When I finally figured out he was serious, I was pretty speechless. I managed to get out a 'Hell, yes' before I started to get all emotional."

Parker spent most of his childhood on the streets. His father died when he was in third grade, and his mother worked multiple shifts trying to pay for their livelihood, but often struggled to come up with enough cash to keep them off the streets, resulting in them often staying in shelters and friends' houses.

"She spent her life apologizing to me," Parker said. "She said I always deserved better than what she provided. What she gave me, though, was more valuable than money, more important than nice clothes, more lasting than a fancy home. She loved me, and I loved her."

In his sophomore year, Parker's mother died of Stage 4 breast cancer, and Parker found himself with nowhere to turn but a tent in Tarrytown Park. But that all changed when he met Stephens.

"When I found Harry in that tent two years ago, I never expected to see a teenager," Stephens said. "I figured it was an old homeless guy—not a 15-year-old kid."

Instead of arresting Parker for trespassing, however, Stephens offered Parker his house, giving Parker a home for the remainder of high school, and after the adoption papers get signed, the rest of his life.

"I am so thankful for him, and I know my mom is, too," Parker said. "On Wednesday, we are signing the papers at the courthouse, and then all of David's family—I guess I can say my family now—are coming over for a barbecue. It definitely will be a day to celebrate."

Stephens was also the one who pushed Parker to share his story and said he is immensely proud of Parker getting into Harvard University.

"Harvard would have been crazy not to accept Harry and give him the scholarship," Stephens said. "He's the hardest working kid I've ever met, and he's faced more than a few challenges along the way."

These challenges, according to Parker, were mostly kept secret from his peers. He said only a few teachers were aware of his mother's death, and he didn't tell anyone he had nowhere to go afterward. His English teacher, Jessica Martin, said she was completely unaware of the majority of his struggles until she read his college essay.

"It made me so sad when I read his essay, but the essay is also incredibly uplifting," Martin said. "Harvard is lucky to get Harry. When he told me it was the only school he was applying to, I encouraged him to have a backup, but Harry didn't want to go to any other school. He told me, 'This is it. This is my goal.'"

Parker said he accredits his drive to get to Harvard to his mother, who not only initially introduced him to the school, but also gave him the vital advice he needed to push through and fight to get accepted.

"There were plenty of times I wanted to give up, but after my mom died, I could hear her voice whispering to me," he said. "Never give up. I didn't because I didn't want to let her down. My success is her success."