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HIGH SCHOOL SWIMMING

Family copes with tragedy

Former All-Dade swimmer Robert Smiddy, 20, died Saturday. On Monday, hundreds of stunned friends and family members gathered to pay their respects.

By MANNY NAVARRO
mnavarro@herald.com

A former All-Dade swimmer and an aspiring doctor.

A talented pianist and a caring big brother to seven siblings.

Robert Smiddy's talents were endless -- so much so that his own piano concerto was playing in the background at his memorial Monday night.

Smiddy, a senior at FIU, died of a ruptured spleen Saturday morning, two weeks short of his 21st birthday.

The news shocked the South Florida swimming community, which has grown to know the Smiddys as one of the most talented families in Miami-Dade. Matthew, 17, Rebecca, 16, and Susan, 14, were all state finalists for Gulliver Prep last year.

Monday night, hundreds of family members, friends, students, teachers, coaches, swimmers and even musicians gathered at Southwest Community Church in Southwest Dade to pay their respects to Robert.

"I don't really know how we're supposed to go on from here," said Matthew, who along with his father, William, an eight-time NCAA swimming champion, spoke at the memorial. "I know people look at this and say, 'Why did it happen?' I'm not sure why it happened. I'm just grateful for the 17 years I had him in my life."

William Smiddy said Robert had come down with flu-like symptoms on Monday. Smiddy said his son, who was living on campus at FIU, left his dorm that night and spent the rest of the week at home.

At 2:30 a.m. Saturday morning, hours before his brothers and sisters were to swim in prelim races at the Dade County Youth Fair Championships, Robert collapsed in his bedroom.

By the time Robert was taken to a hospital, Smiddy said his son was pronounced dead. Smiddy said the medical examiner told him his son had died from a ruptured spleen, a rare complication from mononucleosis.

A 'PERFECT BROTHER'

"He was the perfect older brother," William Smiddy said. "For 20 years of his life, he was such a great, loving brother to all of them. I'd like to think we have a lot of faith in this family. We're just going to have to pick ourselves up."

Susan, a freshman at Gulliver Prep, made it a point Saturday morning to pick up her family by asking Rebecca and Matthew, who also swim for Gulliver, to complete Saturday's Youth Fair Championships at Tamiami Pool.

"On Friday, before they left for the prelims, Robert had wished them good luck," her father said. "Having swam in it before, he knew how important the Youth Fair was. [Susan] really felt after he died that it was her duty to swim her best for him."

Susan, Rebecca and Matthew came through with what Gulliver coach Peter Prins called "one of the most impressive performances" he has ever seen.

Susan won the 200-yard freestyle in 1:51.45 -- six seconds faster than the second-place finisher. Matthew won the 200 individual medley and the 500 freestyle. And Rebecca had a pair of top five finishes in the 200 IM and the 500 free as Gulliver's girls' won the team meet.

Afterward, however, there were no celebrations. The Smiddys cried and were comforted by dozens of coaches and athletes, who had all known and loved Robert.

"The Youth Fair is always looked at as a great meet, and there is always so much excitement," said Belen coach Kirk Peppas, who has coached Robert and the rest of the Smiddy family at the Metro Aquatic Club for the past several years. "There was none of that Saturday."

"Everyone could feel their pain. Everyone who knew Robert was in utter shock."

A SUPER TALENT

Robert Smiddy was more than just an All-Dade swimmer for three years. Like his younger brothers and sisters, who have all been home-schooled by mother Julie, he was an accomplished musician -- winning several awards as a concert pianist.

This summer, the Smiddys recorded a song together for their church. It was the final song played Monday night.

His father, now a leading professor at the Bascom Palmer Eye Institute, said his son was preparing to graduate in the spring and wanted to go to medical school.

Few who knew Robert doubted his ability to be great in whatever he chose to do.

"The thing I remember most about him is when we were at a sectional championship about three years ago," Peppas said. "Between prelims and finals, he comes running over to me telling me that he has to practice the piano."

"Here we are at the Swimming Hall of Fame on Fort Lauderdale Beach and the kid is asking me for a piano when he should have been resting."

"By chance, I found a coach who lived nearby and had a piano at his house. We drove there, and for three or four hours, he banged away. An hour later, we were back

at the pool, and he was racing. Robert gave 100 percent for everything all the time.

``What hurts me more than anything is that you think about a kid his age with how much he had to offer the world.

``And now he's gone."`

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