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Guardian angel guides Cowan graduate Samantha Underwood to play volleyball

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Detached logic says fate, or perhaps destiny, steered Samantha Underwood to Tusculum College.

The emotionally vested Underwood disagrees. Her heart tells her a guardian angel by the name of Jill Lucas guided her to play volleyball for the NCAA Division II school in Greeneville, Tenn.

Underwood, a 2009 Cowan graduate, moved into her campus dorm on Aug. 8, 11 years after Lucas blazed the trail from Delaware County to Tusculum.

Lucas enrolled at the school in the fall of 1998. She played volleyball for the Pioneers where she twice notched All-Southern Atlantic Conference honors.

The 1998 Wes-Del graduate excelled in whatever she pursued on and off the court. She touched countless lives with her bubbly enthusiasm, compassion and megawatt smile.

"She was very, very outgoing," her brother Mark Lucas says. "When we talk about her, we say she did more in 21 years of life than some people do in a full lifetime."

Tragic conclusion

Jill Lucas touched lives on the Tusculum campus and at the United Way of Johnson City-Washington County where she interned as a senior.

Following a shift there on a Wednesday afternoon in October of 2001, Lucas headed back in the direction of her campus apartment.

According to Tennessee authorities, as Lucas traveled south in the right lane of U.S. 11 East at approximately 3 p.m., a semitractor-trailer traveling in the left lane slowed down and moved into her lane in an attempt to U-turn on the four-lane highway.

Witnesses told police that the semi, driven by Kevin Taylor of Bristol, Va., forced Lucas off the right side of the road. Her Jeep then moved back onto the roadway and flipped multiple times.

The 21-year-old Lucas died shortly after the wreck at Johnson City Medical Center.

"When we got the phone call we were told they had lifelined her and we needed to get there as soon as possible," Mark says. "Word got to us that she had died and we still had five hours of driving ahead of us."

Mark says he lived in a fog for the next few days, but he distinctly remembers the outpouring of support the family received from the Tusculum student body.

"Most of her teammates were still waiting for us at the hospital, and they stayed there until we were

ready to leave which was basically Thursday morning," Mark says.

On campus, Tusculum students held an impromptu candlelight vigil Wednesday night. News of her death soon spread to fellow conference schools triggering similar reactions.

"She was a fantastic girl, a tremendous lady," says Tusculum volleyball coach Michael Johnson, a coach at conference rival Mars Hill College in 2001. "Her death rocked everyone in the conference."

Her memorial service held that Friday morning in the Tusculum gymnasium, Alpine Arena, drew a packed house. Those in attendance wore black-and-orange commemorative ribbons. Her siblings, Mark and Kim, classmates, Applebee's co-workers and volleyball players from fellow conference schools all spoke at the service.

"Someone told us there were only a handful of students that weren't there," Mark says. "People came up to us and they were amazingly sincere. It was very humbling."

The Tusculum football program honored her that Saturday by painting the No. 11, her volleyball jersey number, on the football field and holding a moment of silence before its game against Newberry College.

The volleyball program postponed its matches for that weekend against Newberry and Presbyterian College.

"I'm not proud of this, but I learned from it that work isn't the most important thing," Mark says before his voice cracks. "When she was going to school I had my own business at the time -- a landscaping business. She was a senior and I had not been down there to see a single game. I was coming that Friday for senior night and that weekend was the conference tournament.

"It kills me," Mark says as the tears flow. He regroups and after a few moments and says, "The team that won the conference all signed a volleyball and gave it to my parents. There were letters and cards we received from all kinds of schools."

Similar on and off court

Multiple organizations associated with Lucas set up scholarships in her name. Wave Volleyball Club named Underwood the inaugural recipient for the Jill Lucas scholarship in 2002.

"Jill and Sam are both driven to excel, both easy to coach. They loved to get out there and play," says former Wave director Chuck Wallen who coached both girls for the club. "They are both very athletic middles. Both were team leaders and both of them were pretty aggressive about wanting to win."

Their similarities extended beyond the court.

Underwood possesses a megawatt smile of her own, and she, too, socializes with anyone and everyone. She inherited her athleticism and comedic sense of humor from her father and her caring touch from her mother.

Her mother, Tammy Underwood, prompted the Lucas name to resurface about five years after Samantha won the scholarship.

"We were driving down Cowan (on S. Delaware County Road 50W) and there was this really pretty house that my mom had always talked about, and she heard that the person living there might be selling it," Samantha Underwood says. "My mom said, 'I'm stopping at this house to find out.' Turns out it was Jill's brother who lived there."

Mere coincidence? Maybe so, but what happened on their visit to Tusculum this past January defies probability and sealed her commitment to play at Tusculum.

Father knows best

Burned out from a half-dozen previous college visits, Underwood considered canceling her visit to Tusculum. Mother Nature provided her further motivation to cancel as the frigid January temperatures and icy conditions screamed stay inside under a blanket.

Underwood only learned of the tiny Division II school after Johnson and his assistant coach Abbi Blackburn, a 2003 New Castle High School graduate, took note of her at the Team Indiana Junior/Senior Showcase in December.

"There was something special about her that led us to come back and see her," Johnson said. "The first time I met her and her father (Scott Underwood) I felt a good connection."

Scott convinced his daughter and wife to follow through with their commitment and travel down to Tusculum for the visit.

The old cliché father knows best played out as Samantha finally found the college that lived up to the picture she painted in her mind -- a campus with coffee shops and an old-fashioned brick library.

"When we arrived at Tusculum the campus was beautiful, and we went to the coffee shop and I could tell she really liked it, and then we went to the library and it was beautiful," Tammy says. "As the day went on, I could tell everything she was looking for in a college was falling into place."

The tour of the volleyball facility provided the finishing touch.

Guardian angel

Just inside the locker room door at Alpine Arena, Underwood spotted a tribute to a former Pioneer. The name of the player caught her off guard.

"When we made our visit there, we saw a memorial for (Lucas) and it hit us that it was the school she went to," Underwood says. "The only thing I was wavering on was how far from home it is. It's about seven hours or so, and when we walked out of the locker room and I saw the memorial I knew this is where I'm supposed to be."

Mark discovered that Underwood committed to play volleyball at Tusculum shortly after the school posted the news on its Web site. Mark says his wife Holly checks out the site periodically and she noticed an update that mentioned Underwood as one of three commits.

"It's pretty cool. I guess it's karma," Mark says.

When told that Underwood considers his sister to be her guardian angel, Mark choked up a bit before mustering the strength to say, "I never thought of it like that. That's neat."
