

The house that grief built

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Annual construction project a testament to love, camaraderie



Charlotte Sidman (left) and Tess Sivak attach brackets to posts at Viking House. Crew member Cody Fellows used to tease them, saying Its painful to watch you guys swing a hammer, Sivak said. Sometimes that made him tough to work with, she said, but when he died, we just cried for like, days.

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In a normal year, Viking House crew members have to weather setbacks such as broken tools, torrential downpours or behind-schedule deliveries as they work to build a professional-quality house in a Forest Grove neighborhood, learning valuable construction skills along the way.

This year, the 15 students in Forest Grove High School’s advanced-construction class faced setbacks of a whole different magnitude.

Deaths.

Not just one, but two young people connected to the Viking House family died suddenly this spring, providing lessons that aren’t on the usual Viking House syllabus — on grief, resilience, mortality, compassion.

Perhaps that’s why in the nearly 15 years since the high school began awarding varsity letters to Viking House crew members who meet strict standards for things like character, work ethic and volunteer hours, this is the first year every single crew member has qualified for one.



by: NEWS-TIMES PHOTO: CHASE ALLGOOD - Advanced Construction teacher Chris Higginbotham (right) has been finishing up the Viking House while grieving the deaths of crew member Cody Fellows and of his own 21-year-old son, Sheyn. I haven't been myself, Higginbotham said, aware that his crew members know when he's struggling. I can just see the concern in their eyes.

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Grief sent them stumbling, but grief helped them recover, too, as they poured all the energy of the love behind that grief into this year's Viking House.

"To quote from 'A Tale of Two Cities,'" said Viking House instructor Chris Higginbotham, "It really was the worst of times and the best of times all at once."

Students from different backgrounds



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For Higginbotham, who has spent 17 years acting as teacher and general contractor for each new Viking House, the best part is watching students from wildly different backgrounds come together.

There are girls and boys, liberals and conservatives, whites and Latinos, farm kids and city kids, valedictorians and students struggling to graduate.

Usually, after a year of hard work and cooperation, they've all bonded.

"I wish more people could see this," Higginbotham said. "They'd have so much more faith in the future of our country."

He's not the only one who loves Viking House.

"Sometimes it's like the only reason I want to come to school," said Tess Sivak, who drifted into Viking House after taking Woods 1 as an elective.

"The highlight of my year," Charlotte Sidman calls it.

"I don't want it to end," said Cody Stevens, who has been interested in construction since he was a little kid.

This year's house — a three-bedroom, two-bath single-level at 424 Forest Place in Forest Gale Heights — is hosting an open house from noon to 5 p.m. this Friday and Saturday, May 30-31, for any who would like to see the students' work.

It's an impressive structure with maple cabinets and floors, natural light and other Scandinavian touches inspired by the open design. Higginbotham expects a sale price in the high \$300,000 range.

Construction was moving along quickly this year, thanks in part to the hard-working "engine" of the crew, Cody Fellows — until the night of March 4.

That's when Fellows' mother found him dead on a couch, felled by a congenital heart problem.

Tough crew turns vulnerable

Higginbotham sent a text to all Viking House students late that night, asking them to meet him in his office the next morning before school.

"Most of us thought we were in trouble," said Randy Avendano, who describes himself as "average grade-wise (but) I've always liked working with my hands."

Avendano and Fellows had teamed up at the house just the day before. The two were hammering siding onto walls "and we kept hitting our thumbs," Avendano remembers, and Fellows kept singing the Britney Spears song, "Oops, I Did It Again."

When they learned Fellows had died, crew members skipped classes that day and huddled together in the woodshop, where they worked on a memorial picture frame and talked about their missing friend. Girls cried. Boys cried.

"Everyone shed a tear over that one," Stevens said.

Even Higginbotham teared up, said Sivak. "For him, that was huge...He doesn't show a lot of sadness."



News-Times photo: Chase Allgood

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It was a rare moment of vulnerability, "especially for these people because they're very like, tough," Sivak said.

"It brought us closer together," Avendano said. "We appreciated each other more."

"It was a very safe place," said crew member Duncan Stewart.

"We've always been nice to each other but now it was more ... compassion," said Stevens. "There was a lot of hugging."

Higginbotham went out to the Viking House site alone "and it was hard just to look at the wall he (Fellows) was working on," he said. When the school bus dropped crew members off there the next day, he had the driver hang around in case any students wanted to leave.

Some had seemed hesitant about being there, said Jane Knowlton, interior designer for Viking House.

The crew gathered in the garage, still stricken, but before too long they decided to honor their fallen friend by doing what he'd want them to do: getting back to work.

"That's what Cody would have done," said Stevens.

Viking House moved forward. Instead of faltering, “we stepped it up,” Sivak said.

It was the crew’s way of working through their grief, Knowlton said.

A month later they got another shock: Higginbotham’s oldest son, 21-year-old Sheyn, had died suddenly.

Helpless feeling

The Viking House crew mourned again, but in a different way. None had met Sheyn. But they loved their Viking House “dad” and knew he was hurting. They just didn’t know what to do for him.

“We felt kind of helpless,” Avendano said.

Some crew members went to Sheyn’s memorial service.

Stevens asked an adult friend who’d also lost his son to contact Higginbotham.

Sivak and Sidman brought a cup of coffee and a note to Higginbotham’s house. They set it by the front door, rang the doorbell and left.

“We’re really close to Mr. Higginbotham so we really felt for him,” Sivak said.

“He always tells us we’re like family to him,” said Rosario Torres.

Higginbotham didn’t show up at Viking House for a week. Curtis Ludwick, the finish-carpentry instructor, took over his contracting duties. Chuck Thurber, a longtime shop teacher, came out of retirement to run his classes. Knowlton made decisions about cabinets, electrical work and whatever else came up.

When he returned, Higginbotham kept Thurber on hand for a week, ready to take over if necessary.

“I had to leave a few times,” he said.

“It was hard just to see Mr. Higginbotham — how he was,” said Duncan Stewart. “You could see it in his eyes.”

Once again the crew pulled together, using the best way they could think of to comfort their grieving teacher: they threw themselves into finishing the house.

To pass the advanced-construction class, students must put in a minimum of 240 hours. But Viking House crew members usually work extra hours on weekends, holidays or after school to ensure a top-quality product.

In 2012, when Higginbotham first decided to tally up the combined total “overtime” hours worked by the entire crew, it was 369.

Last year’s crew worked more than 600 “volunteer” hours.

The 2014 crew has set a record, working more than 800 hours above and beyond the 240 required.

The dedication, love and camaraderie behind that feat makes Higginbotham particularly proud after all the crew has gone through this year.

“Like I wasn’t so proud of them already,” he said.