

# WHS Scholarship Award Night 2022

## *Cody Heppner Mental Health Memorial Scholarship*

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First of all, congratulations to all of you seniors. We celebrate you and your accomplishments and look forward to your future. Every one of you are graduating a Warroad Warrior and you will carry that pride with you as you head off on your next big adventure. Some of you will return to build a career and raise a family, while others will venture out to other places, but no matter where you go, this little town on the big lake will have had an influence in your future. Take time to reflect on those that helped you along the way and always remember where you came from. As you go, I want to challenge you to be a Warrior for life, but a different type of Warrior. Whether you recognize it or not, each of you is a Mental Health Warrior.

There are three types of Mental Health Warriors and each of you fits one of these categories.

The first type is the individual who has a mental illness. Many individuals who are struggling with a mental health condition are treated differently, feel alone and isolated. They feel they can't reach out for help because the stigma of mental illness suppresses any thoughts they have of getting help. Many struggle with suicidal thoughts and depression and some, tragically, lose this battle.

The next group are the caregivers of people with mental illness, whether it be a family member or a close friend. They battle every day to be there for their loved one. They often have very few resources, feel alone, isolated, and hopeless. They are worn out, and they often fight for their loved one's mental health, while no one around knows the struggle they face each day.

The last type of warrior are individuals who want to see our mental health system do more and get involved through advocacy, education or as mental health professionals such as counselors, social workers, psychologists, psychiatrists and neurologists.

As much as I wish no one here ever had to think about being a Mental Health Warrior, the sad reality is, each of us has had to learn about and deal with the sting and reality of mental illness. It leaves us with two choices. One is to do nothing, but the result of that choice only ends in tragedy. The other choice is to be active and vocal about mental illness and advocate for the well-being of every one's mental health.

If you fall into the first group, and suffer with anxiety, depression, or an eating disorder, you are not alone. There are others who understand what you are going through. You are also not alone, because whether you feel it or not, there are many people who care for you, who will say you matter, and who will say you are loved. Reach out to a family member, friend, coach, pastor or any other person you trust. You matter. Fight for your well-being. You are much stronger than you believe. You are a Warrior.

Many of you here tonight may fall into the second group and know someone who is daily fighting a mental health battle. You may be exhausted but don't feel you can let that show. You also fight a stigma, because the loved one you are helping to navigate through their journey doesn't want anyone else to know what they are going through. No one needs to tell you this, but you may need to hear it. Keep fighting, but you also need to take care of yourself. If you are not healthy, you will not have the energy to support someone else through their darkest times. You are a Warrior.

The third group, those individuals that advocate for change in the mental health field, or provide education and resources, will be key to changing the stigma that surrounds the topic of mental health. We need to have these conversations. This needs to be as normal as talking about any other illness. Warroad is a tight knit community and looks out for its own. The Max Foundation is a perfect example of that. Their whole purpose is to support activities that promote mental wellness in our young people. Each and every one of you has the opportunity, and the responsibility, to talk openly with your friends and peers and be open about mental health. Have the conversation, be the change this world needs.

Tragically, our family knows the roles of Mental Health Warriors all too well. Our son Cody suffered from mental health issues we believe were derived from being abandoned at birth and the events in

his early life that led to us adopting him. The stigma surrounding mental health often stopped him from seeking help, and those times when he was willing and ready to see a professional, the lack of resources often left him unable to seek professional help when he needed it the most. Cody was a Warrior. Our whole family sought to help, guide and protect Cody through his journey. Many days it wasn't easy. Many days it left us exhausted, both emotionally and physically. Life was hard at times, but life was also good. Cody was a gift, and we would give anything to continue to walk that journey with him again.

Tragedy often brings reflection. Cody had a big heart and a giant smile. Cody's life had meaning and purpose. In reflecting on Cody's life and his experience, our family decided we would like to encourage those seeking a career in the mental health field. That idea grew and tonight we are happy to give out the first Cody Heppner Mental Health Memorial Scholarship. Our family was excited when Mrs. Lindner told us five seniors had applied for the scholarship. To each one of you, our family thanks you. Each of you wrote an essay as to why you were entering this field, and each one was very touching. Each of you has a life experience pushing you towards this career. We appreciate you. You are Mental Health Warriors, and we look forward to the great things each of you will do. It was extremely hard to choose, so we decided to give out two scholarships this year. These two young ladies took their life experiences and are using them to help others. Avianna Heppner and April Ellis-Torkelson, please come forward to receive your scholarships.