

LOCAL

Monument of 'Stars': Family honors Kentucky high school athlete who died of cardiac arrest



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LEXINGTON – Light filtered through the leaves onto the edge of a metal star and briefly lit the face of a mourning mother.

For the last six years, Peace Ifeacho came to this plot of land at the Lexington Cemetery, crying for her son, speaking gentle, loving words to the dirt beneath her.

For her, this is not a final resting place. It's a place to gather, a place to remember.

This is the garden of a forever 15-year-old, Star Ifeacho.

On Wednesday at 4:30 p.m., six years to the exact moment Star collapsed on the sideline of his high school's basketball court, Peace and her eldest son, Sam, stood next to the garden, surrounded by friends, ready to share with them a marker to identify the land as Star's.

Getting to this point has been a long journey for the family. They didn't want what traditionally marks a grave because Star wasn't a traditional person. For five years, nothing felt right.

“The first year, it was very difficult,” Sam said of trying to create a memory stone. “The second year, it was not any easier.”

But bit by bit, over the last year, the Ifeachos began to design the tribute to Star.

Peace looked at Sam: “Unveil the monument.”

He tugged at a white ribbon and lifted the blue fabric to gasps.

“It's beautiful,” a mother in the crowd cried.

“It's perfect,” said another.

Investigation: The Courier Journal spent several months investigating sudden death in high school sports. Here's what we found

A life lost by delay

Families of high school athletes across the nation have faced similar moments at their child's grave. Since Star's collapse, at least 65 athletes have died. The Courier Journal tracked more than 1,700 cases of athlete deaths back to the start of the 20th century.

Star is also one of hundreds of athletes to suffer sudden cardiac arrest, the leading cause of death in high school athletes.

More: While lawmakers haggled over cost of safety, young athletes died across the US

On April 26, 2017, during an off-season open gym for the basketball team at Paul Laurence Dunbar, Star didn't feel well and was with the school's athletic trainer when he collapsed from cardiac arrest.

The closest automated external defibrillator, or AED, hung in a cabinet just outside the gym doors. The athletic trainer sent Star's teammates to get it, but they didn't know what an AED looked like or where it was.

An AED wasn't applied to Star for close to 10 minutes, according to court documents.

"Ninety percent of athletes, if they have an AED access within two to three minutes, survive a cardiac arrest," said Dr. Doug Casa, head of the Korey Stringer Institute, which works to better policies and procedures related to sudden death of athletes.

At 5:47 p.m. at University of Kentucky Hospital, he was pronounced dead.

More: Most Kentucky public schools don't follow emergency planning law, leaving athletes at risk

Star Ifeacho titled his kindergarten memoir, *Life*.

I'm thankful for life because without life I would not be here, he wrote.

Over the next decade, basketball became the center of Star's life.

One day on the ride home, Star was telling his mom about his basketball practice.

His coach had upset him. Maybe he wouldn't play basketball.

"Why do you play?" Peace asked her son. "You don't play for (the coach). You need to think about why you play."

In one of the last essays he wrote, Star began, "Why do I play basketball with so much passion?"

"I play for the love of the game and for me, basketball is life. My attitude is to live my life with passion," he wrote. "I believe that your attitude, not strictly your talent will determine your future."

Success is an attitude because you are the only one who has control of you..."

13 stars

For the next hour, Peace's left hand rarely left the edge of the newly unveiled stone.

Sometimes, over the last six years, Peace visited the spot and found fresh flowers left by Star's friends.

Sometimes, she would come and groom the ground and tend to the plants, in a way she knew her son would like.

"Now that we're setting this in stone, there's a certain finality about it – an acceptance to it, that I wasn't prepared for," she said.

Star's friends Sydney, Spencer, Michael, Sophia, Bella and Grayson stood next to Peace, their arms wrapped around each other.

This had become their healing place.

"We'll come back here and continue to groom it and grow – because for the last six years, that's what we've done," Peace said. "We've tried to heal."

On the face of the stone, 12 stars streak from left to right, leading toward a metal star that sits atop the monument.

Thirteen stars for No. 13, Star Ifeacho.