

# The New York Times

## *For a Grieving Teenager, Much-Needed Companionship (on 2 and 4 Legs)*

The Neediest Cases Fund

By JOHN OTIS

OCT. 30, 2017



Providencia Vanderpool was reminiscing with her youngest son about his father when suddenly the boy's words alarmed her.

Her son, Noel, asked if she was starting to forget her husband, who died in 2014.

"I asked, 'Why would you say that?'" Mrs. Vanderpool, 50, recalled recently. "He said, 'Because you don't talk about him every day.' But I remember him every single day."

Mrs. Vanderpool knows she will never forget the man she was married to for three decades, but fears that Noel's memories will fade. Their two other children, Kirk and Rick, were in their 20s when their father died. Noel was only 11. And he never got to say goodbye.

Battling kidney disease for years, her husband, Ricardo Vanderpool, had a heart attack after a two-week hospitalization. Mrs. Vanderpool did not bring Noel to the hospital.

"I don't think he would have wanted Noel to see him like that," she said.

While she feels that she honored her husband's wishes by keeping Noel away, she also feels plagued by guilt that he did not see his father one last time.

Mrs. Vanderpool, who met her husband when she was 14, keeps his spirit alive through stories and photographs in her apartment on the Lower East Side of Manhattan. Thousands more pictures are stacked in boxes.

“When I go to someone’s house, and they don’t have pictures, it’s not alive,” Mrs. Vanderpool said. “I like to see a family. I like to see a story.”

For her story, Mrs. Vanderpool points to pictures of herself and her husband lounging on a cruise ship, and in costume at Comic Con, where she dressed as the “Harry Potter” character Hermione Granger, and he as a colonel. There are pictures of each child’s first bath and first day of school, others with them playing video games or napping with their father.

Mr. Vanderpool’s absence had an immediate impact on Noel’s behavior. He got in fights at school, one provoked by a classmate who had mocked him for praying that his father would return to life.

“His grades were terrible,” Mrs. Vanderpool said. “He started failing. He wasn’t paying attention. It was a struggle to send him to school.”

Mrs. Vanderpool got Noel a Yorkshire terrier named Jack to provide him with much-needed companionship, and she also sought to find Noel a confidant outside the family.

In May, Noel, now 14, was matched with a big brother through Catholic Big Sisters & Big Brothers, an affiliate of Catholic Charities, one of the eight organizations supported by The New York Times Neediest Cases Fund. Enter Ben Green, from Dublin, who moved to New York City with his wife seven years ago.

“My thinking of it is just to give him another outlet to talk to someone else, if he wants,” Mr. Green, 35, said. “I don’t push any agenda. If he wants to talk about something, I’m there to listen and help him think through stuff. Or to not talk and just wander around.”

Noel recently started his freshman year at New Design High School. Mrs. Vanderpool says Noel is on time for appointments and engaged in his studies, a difference she credits to Mr. Green and his active role in Noel’s life.



Noel Vanderpool, 14, has been exploring New York City with the mentor he met through Catholic Big Sisters & Big Brothers. Credit: Melissa Bunni Elian for The New York Times

"I haven't gotten one single call yet," Mrs. Vanderpool said.

"I just paid the teachers off," Noel joked.

The family faced another setback last year when Mrs. Vanderpool learned she had kidney cancer. Doctors performed surgery to remove a tumor, and she spent three and a half months away from her job.

Mrs. Vanderpool works in social services and earns \$42,000 a year. Her monthly bills include \$541 in rent and \$500 for food, as well as a number of other expenses, including helping her mother, who has multiple sclerosis, with her bills. Additionally, Mrs. Vanderpool owes about \$60,000 in student loans.

Catholic Charities used \$340 from the Neediest Cases Fund at the start of the academic year to buy Noel new school clothes, including a winter coat and sneakers, and to buy work clothes for Mrs. Vanderpool. Additionally, Catholic Big Sisters & Big Brothers gave Noel a new backpack filled with school supplies.

Noel usually meets with Mr. Green every other week. Mr. Green, who works for the Metropolitan Transportation Authority, chose the New York Transit Museum as one of their first outings. Other activities have included a bike ride near the South Street Seaport, a visit to the Irish Hunger Memorial in Battery Park City and an exploration of Green-Wood Cemetery and its mausoleums in Brooklyn.

"After you've been here a few years, your circle of the city shrinks," Mr. Green said. "So it's good for both of us to go out and explore neighborhoods."

So far, Mr. Green has chosen all of the activities, but he expects that Noel will begin proposing ideas as he continues to emerge from his shell.

"He's not a bad kid," Mrs. Vanderpool said. "He's a good kid who had something terrible happen to him."