

Chapel Sermon – Jan. 29, 2024

By Michele Davis

Michele Davis, one of the Warrior Moms, spoke at the Lovett School's chapel service. She teaches in the Upper School and shared a message of honesty about grief, love for those who seek the light and find hope even in the midst of sorrow.

Lovett students began by reading the following Bible Verse Readings chosen by Michele:

A reading from Philippians 4:13: "I can do all things through Christ which strengthens me."

A reading from Revelations 21:4: "He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away."

A reading from Psalm 23: "The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters. He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake. Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me. Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever."

Michele:

Thank you, Reverend Allen, for inviting me to share today. And thanks to Mr. Newman, Mr. May-Beaver, and Ms. Morris for helping me shape my writing and encouraging me to speak today.

Michele:

One of the most beautiful places in the world to me is Sylvan Lake and the Needles Highway in the Black Hills of South Dakota, just twenty minutes from where I grew up. Granite spires over two billion years old line a windy road that climbs quickly from 3000 feet to 7000 feet in elevation. Among the hikes in this area is a secret hike called Poet's Table.

One must know a local to get to this spot. Directions sound like:

Walk 100 paces past the first footbridge. Turn west and walk until you see the charred aspen. Turn north until you reach the fallen pine tree...and so on.

The hike's surprise at the top— short but steep and tucked between these granite fingers—sits a green dining room table, a small hutch, and four chairs.

Carved into the table and penned into the tablets, visitors' poems, artwork, and mementos--all expressions of life and love and hope.

This was the hike where Carter, my 17-year-old son, my sister, my niece, and I spent our last time together. My sister Melanie made a wishing box for visitors to add hope for the future. Luckily, Skye (my niece and Carter's best friend) wrote her wish alongside Carter's. Carter's wish was *for the world to have more love, not for a fast car or to be signed by a D1 lacrosse program but a hope for more love...to soften the sharp edges with empathy and kindness.*

I remember walking to the cliff's rim, enjoying the vast skyline of the Black Hills. "Carter, did you know those two spires touching across the ravine are called Praying Hands?"

Carter wrapped his arm over my shoulder. "Yeah, mom." He nodded, "Pretty great day, huh?"

Yep, it sure was.

Carter was murdered just three days later alongside his friend Natalie Henderson. Wrong time and place--evil struck, and these two bright lights were extinguished behind a Publix on the street with million-dollar homes on August 1st early in the morning Carter was supposed to start his first day of senior year.

So many people tell me *I don't know how you do it. How do you go on after such a horrific trauma? What carries you through each day...in fact, what even gets you out of bed?*

My answer: I put one foot in front of the other because of my love for my family, my faith, and my drive to find joy again...yes, even amid great grief.

I wish there was a magic potion, a wand I could wave over all of us to give strength when the unthinkable occurs. I wish I could wave that wand over all of us so that the unthinkable never happens in the first place. But, there isn't one. And I can't.

So instead I think of my son's crooked smile. The way he lived life ALL-IN. He was an incredible athlete and student, but more than that, he was really kind. Carter wasn't worried that his lacrosse teammates might think

he was a brownnoser for helping his coaches set up equipment before practice or for shaking the ref's hand after each game; he didn't worry about what his advisory buddies would think of him when he helped a quiet girl who normally sat alone study for every math test his junior year; and he never worried about what his peers would think when he'd give me a huge sweaty hug after his football games before telling me "I love you, Mom."

I think of these things because they're my magic wand. And there are others.

I remember the afternoon after Carter died. I looked at Jeremy, my husband, and said, "How are we going to do this? How can we ensure our 8-year-old Greta is going to be ok?"

He shook his head slowly through tears, then said, "With faith. There's nothing else."

That afternoon, we had our first meeting with the detectives. The killer was still on the loose. We had to hear so many tough details...to say it was traumatic is an understatement. The police left, and Jeremy, Greta, and I went on the porch. Jeremy held all of us. We cried, and then Jeremy told our daughter Greta to watch and listen, that God would send us blessings from Carter...that he didn't quite know how this all worked, but that we needed to watch for pennies, feathers, dragonflies...who knows what, but to watch for these signs, letting us know Carter was okay.

"Dad," Greta said, "Maybe Carter will send a dog."

"Yes, I can see Carter loving that, as he sure loved to chase balls. I don't know...I see him as a hawk or an eagle, soaring high above us."

The next day, two incredible things happened. I was sharing devastating details with my parents and sisters when a beautiful yellow and black Monarch butterfly landed right by us. Its four-inch wings opened and closed. We all cried because we instantly remembered all the times Carter caught butterflies. This particular butterfly stayed for over ten minutes, and we laughed and cried. Then, it darted through the trees as if it were showing off.

That night, we had a vigil at Carter's school. Family and friends surrounded a tall tree with a table and, on it, a 4-foot tall lacrosse picture of Carter, so that when the other lacrosse players lined up around his image, it was as if he was there. My dad welcomed and thanked everyone for coming and read a beautiful, prayerful tribute about Carter, his faith, and friendships. As my dad spoke, a hawk swooped in over his head, screeching, and landed on the tree behind him. The hawk stayed there, and when my dad finished speaking, it flew across the crowd. With tears streaming, we could not believe our eyes.

Greta and my niece Skye had moved to the long sidewalk to write chalk messages about how they would miss Carter and Natalie. High school students moved over as well and added more notes. And soon came the hawk, about ten feet above the students, soaring silently with little swallows chirping behind just 10 feet over their heads.

A few weeks later, at our first lacrosse pickup game, one of Carter's teammates from South Dakota flew in for the game. He wore Carter's helmet and jersey. In the middle of passing and racing to score, players started yelling at Nate. Everyone stopped, and sure enough, a yellow butterfly had landed on Carter's helmet. And I know this sounds unbelievable, but about thirty minutes later, a hawk landed on the goalpost, just stopping by to watch the game.

We continue to see butterflies in surprising places and hawks on green interstate signs, on the back deck of our house, on mailboxes and fences, on light poles, in our front yard, at school recess—I could go on and on. These God winks, as my sister Melissa calls them, comfort us, and we indeed smile.

Recently, Carter has made his presence felt in a most unexpected, incredible way. I have taught Slater Nalley for two years now. While my early impressions of Slater were shaped by his wild shenanigans as a sophomore, they quickly changed the day I shared about Carter. In front of his peers, he thanked me for sharing Carter's story, saying he couldn't imagine how tough it was to lose him. I smiled as it reminded me of Carter. Slater didn't care what his peers might think about him offering quick comfort to a teacher; he just gave it because he knew it mattered.

This fall, the English and social studies teachers had the opportunity to take a writing workshop. In one session, I wrote a poem in honor of Carter. A week later, I asked Slater, knowing he was writing new songs, about his process of turning a poem into music. Slater immediately wanted to see the poem. 'He snapped a photo and asked if he could work on it a bit. Two weeks later, he surprised his 4th-period classmates and me by playing a song written in memory of Carter called "Traces of You."

So, back to the question: how do you navigate deep grief? Well, if you're me, you let others embrace you. You look for hawks and butterflies. You tell your story. There's no one road map, that's for sure. And just like the hike to Poet's Table in the Black Hills, life often lacks official directions. But there are guides. Locals who point out the footbridges. The charred aspens. The fallen pines. Your guides might be a teacher or coach you connect with, a grandfather or aunt, a cousin or best friend. Watch for how others deal with hard times. All of us face hardships.

Look for those who live in lightness and joy. Watch what they do and copy it. You might find someone to help you turn your sadness into a song.

Today, I'm standing here still shaking a bit, nervous to give the sermon, but choosing to lean in like Carter and Slater did so I can share a bit of this tough and beautiful journey.

The first reading gives me such comfort as we found the verse written on athletic tape on Carter's lacrosse helmet. I remember Carter and a teammate picking that verse so sincerely.

The second reading grounds me as it reminds me that Carter is okay.

And the third quote...my parents, sisters, and niece had arrived after Carter's death. We all sobbed and hugged, and in a quiet moment, my dad sat with me on the couch. He grabbed my hand and recited Psalm 23. Choosing to look for where God was in this dark valley became my goal. I have learned that yes, it's important to give thanks and praise for our blessings, but students, I hope in dark moments, you can turn to your guides to find something bigger than you and seek the light. Thank you, Slater, for this lifelong gift of song. I'm so excited that you get to share it with the Lovett Upper School today. Thank you for allowing my son to live on in song.

Slater Nalley talks before singing "TRACES OF YOU":

Thank you, Mrs. Davis, for that powerful story and introduction. I'm Slater, and I, with the help of Mrs. Davis and some other amazing people, am honored to announce this year's Carter Davis memorial pick-up game. If you know Mrs. Davis, you know that her bravery, loyalty, and kindness are just a few of her many traits, and I am proud to work on this event with her. Carter was a football and lacrosse player for River Ridge High School and played competitive lacrosse with Roswell High School players. For the lacrosse players out there, an interesting stat was that Carter had 43 assists in just three games. Carter was not just a lacrosse player but a kind and good kid. One of my favorite stories about Carter that Mrs. Davis told me about was that every time Carter and his family moved, Carter insisted he get baptized again. So, between South Dakota and Roswell Georgia, Mrs Davis said that Carter was baptized SEVEN times! I think this is a very good example of who Carter was and I hope that we can all strive to prioritize our faith and be more like Carter. Mrs. Davis, in the past years, has held this event at River Ridge High School, but this year, we are proud to say that Lovett will hold this event, and hopefully, it will be the first of many here at Lovett. So, what is it? It's a lacrosse pick-up game, meaning that all players who sign up will put their lacrosse sticks in a pile, and when the game begins, we will randomly pull out

people's sticks to put them on two teams. Then, we will start to play! Food and drinks will be provided, and I'm pleased to announce that my band will be playing live music for the event. We are super pumped to bring this event here to Lovett. It will be a great day on Sunday, Feb 11th, at Railey Field honoring Carter. Please tell your friends and family, everyone is welcome. The [Google sign-up form](#) to donate and to sign up to attend (not just play) will be sent out and is open to everyone. If you have any questions, just send them to me or Mrs. Davis! Thanks y'all.





