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After tragedy, a remade family finds renewed joy

When 21-year-old Travis Tappa was killed in a crane accident at Voeller Inc. in Port Washington, his parents Denise and Kevin thought the gargantuan holes in their hearts would never heal.

Four years later, the loss is still present, but the huge void began to shrink when their daughter Tanya and grandson Xander came to live with them two years ago. Tanya and Xander's father had separated. The arrangement brings a lot of joy to the Tappas' Port Washington home and is helping to heal the grief for everyone.

Tanya sleeps in the room where she grew up, and her son sleeps in her brother's room.

"We welcomed them with open arms. It's a blessing to have them here," Denise said, her kitchen smelling of banana bread she had just made for Xander to take to school the next day.

It was his special week, and he asked his grandmother to make his favorite nutritious snack so he could treat his kindergarten class at Lincoln School in Port Washington.

"He reminds me so much of Travis. Tanya, yes, but mostly Travis. He has the same sense of humor," Denise said.

"I like when Xander asks me to make banana bread. I like doing things for people, feeling needed. Travis used to call from work and say, 'Mom, will you make me cheesecake tonight?'"

Mother and daughter not only live together, but also work together at Tri-Par in Port Washington. Denise, who manages the store, arranges their schedules so Tanya can take her son to school, Denise can pick him up and one of them is available for field trips, early release and no-school days.

People often ask how they can work and live together.

"We disagree, and we get along great," Denise said. "We're very upfront. Some people can't believe how we talk to each other. I probably treat her harder because I don't want others (employees) to think I'm playing favorites.

"She opens the store for me on weekends. If I need something done, she knows how to do it."

Tanya, and also Travis, started working at Tri-Par with their mother when they were teenagers.

"I've had other jobs, but I would still work there on weekends," Tanya said. "When I started here, I was the grunt. I like working with my mother. Xander likes to sit on the counter and say, 'Grandma is in charge, but I'm the boss.'"

Mother and daughter rarely disagree on how to raise Xander, but when they do her mother usually wins, Tanya said.

"Grandma likes to spoil him a little more than I do," she said. "If there is a little spoiling, it's not hurting him in the least. He's probably better for it. He's very well behaved and well mannered."

Her brother, she said, was like Xander, "Always joking and teasing. It makes life so much easier when you're able to have fun together."

Her parents spoiled her and her brother, Tanya said, but they weren't spoiled rotten, and Xander is growing up the same way.

Tanya said she knew her parents were strong and caring, but she didn't realize how much until her brother died.

Travis was electrocuted while helping load an aggregate storage bin onto a flatbed truck. Travis was standing on the edge of the bin, hooking a chain from a crane to the bin, when the crane either touched an overhead power line or power arced. The power surge killed him.

That evening, the Tappas went to the crane operator's home to tell him not to feel guilty and let him know they didn't blame him. They visited other co-workers as well. Kevin also works at Voeller.

At the time, company president Ted Burbach described Travis as "a great kid, always smiling and singing in the shop."

Tanya said her son is the same way. She helped Xander make a scrapbook to take to school and he started giggling while looking through it.

When she asked what was so funny, he told her, "I'm going to open it to a picture and say, 'No, I can't show you this one,' and then they'll beg to see it."

Denise said her daughter is an excellent mother.

"She's all about Xander and what's best for him," she said.

The young boy, both mother and grandmother say, is wise beyond his years.

Xander, who will be 6 on May 22, remembers Uncle Travis, who called him his little buddy.

He makes sure stockings are hung for Uncle Travis and Bandit, their dog that died last year, for Christmas and St. Nicholas Day.

When Bandit died, Xander told his grandmother, "Don't cry. It's Uncle Travis' time to play with him."

Travis' death isn't the first tragedy to touch the Tappas.

Denise's brother David "Hans" Arendt died in an I-43 multi-vehicle crash that claimed 11 lives on Oct. 11, 2002.

The Tappas almost lost both their children in 2008. In June, Tanya developed a blood clot that went to her lungs. She was in the hospital for two weeks.

One little boy can't heal all those scars, but he sure helps, his grandmother said. A friend calls him "a little boy with an old soul."

Xander knows most of the students and adults in his school and is as comfortable with fourth-graders as he is with kindergartners, his mother said.

Tanya stopped smoking on Easter because of her son.

"He said to me, 'Smoking makes your lungs black. I'm not a doctor, mind you, but black lungs doesn't sound like a good thing to have,'" Tanya said. "What could I say?"

Xander recently told his mother, "You're beautiful and the best mom ever."

He then turned to his grandmother and said, "Grandma, you're beautiful, too."