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Mason Andrade, No. 22, gruns onto the court as he is introduced on Senior Night at Olathe Northwest High School recently. Mason was able to start the game and just barely missed the first 3-point attempt of the game. Courtesy photos

By ROBERT PIERCE

- Leader & Times

As early as age 4, Mason Andrade was diagnosed with autism, but for most of his life, he did not know he had the condition.

“We have never said to Mason you have autism or a learning disability,” his father, Mike Andrade, said in a letter to reporters at the newspaper at Olathe Northwest, the school Mason attended prior to getting into the University of Kansas.

“He’s never asked me, and I’ve never said anything to him,” he said in an interview with the Leader & Times. “I’ve never treated him like he had something wrong. I’ve just treated him like everyone else, and I think maybe that helped him.”

Mason, formerly of Liberal, attended elementary at MacArthur Elementary, intermediate at Cottonwood and lastly middle school at West, before moving to the Kansas City suburb where his family now resides.

Mike said throughout his years in Liberal and then in Olathe, his son has remained upbeat despite his condition.

Mike did say, however, when the family moved to eastern Kansas, they specifically sought a school that had a program for special needs students. What they found was Olathe Northwest.

Mike said Mason handled life at his new school rather well, and to help him handle it even better, as a high school freshman, Mason was introduced as the manager of the school’s basketball program, something Mike said his son had a really good run with.



“His coach, Mike Grove, him and Mason have gotten really close,” Mike said. “Coach Grove had lost his daughter at age 18.”

During his run as the basketball manager at Olathe Northwest, Mason was part of a special moment in a game versus rival Olathe South.

“I went to parent teacher conferences up here, and the coach said, ‘The team has decided that what they want to do is we’re going to call the other team, and we want to let Mason start the game in a Raven uniform,” Mike said. “He’ll be announced as a senior starter. We’re going to set up a play. We’re going to win the tip off, and we’re going to set up a three-point shot for him. We’ve been working with him, and we want to have him take the shot.”

Olathe Northwest has a student population of about 1,800 kids, and Mike said the night of the game, the arena was packed to capacity.

“They probably had about 600 or 700 kids there,” he said. “It had the full band. The building was just full with about 2,500 to 3,000.”

Mike said the atmosphere of the arena could be felt from the moment one entered the building.

“It was senior night,” he said. “He got to walk out there. They made a poster of him. He held up the poster. The fans just went nuts. It was just overwhelming.”

During warm ups, Mason practiced three pointers, making a few of them, which had everyone’s attention in the arena. As the game got underway, ONW got the tip-off as planned, Mason took his shot, and Mike said he just barely missed getting the shot in, which was good consider his lack of experience.

“He’s never been on the court in front of anybody,” he said.

Mason’s teammates made his night even extra special with a gift.

"They called about hour before the game, and the team wanted to buy him a pair of Michael Jordans," he said. "The team bought him the shoes that he wore."

As for life off the court, Mike added many coaches, as well as himself, feel Mason has never had a bad day.

"They've never seen him have a bad day," he said. "He comes to school every day with a positive attitude about life. He never comes thinking that something's going to go wrong. He goes into every situation thinking the answer's going to come out as 'yes.' He thinks he's going to be able to accomplish or at least be able to convince someone that there is a way to have fun and do the right things."

Mike said coaches have said his son could serve as an example to others on how to treat people.

"If everybody could live their life the way we've watched Mason live his life, the world would just be a very happy place," he said.

One day, Mike received a call from Olathe Northwest's school newspaper wanting to write a story about his son.

"We were touched by that," he said.

The Andrade family has heard from many of Mason's fellow students about how the youth touched their lives with what he does. Mike said, in his opinion, his son does not have a special need, but rather a special gift, and that gift is simply his love for making people happy.

"It's kind of like coming home to your puppy," Mike said. "Your puppy doesn't know if you've been working your tail off all day, doesn't know if the printing press has quit, doesn't know if your boss is mad. He doesn't know if your car didn't start. He doesn't know any of that. He

doesn't care."

Mike added his son has no political agenda, and he is only happy about life.

"It just spreads over to so many people," he said. "It's just such a unique talent."

And despite his condition, Mike said Mason is just like any other kid his age.

"My son likes video games," he said. "He likes pizza, hamburgers, girls, music. He's exactly like everybody else."

Now at KU, Mason could be taking on a position similar to the one he had at ONW but in a different sport.

"I met the director of human resources at KU, told him about Mason, and that's how this all got started," Mike said. "Mason was telling the school that he was going to go to KU and be with the football program. They had found a spot for him with the football team."

Mason's father said plans still call for the young man to do work in the football program or in another capacity at KU.

"They're not sure," Mike said. "They want to get him in the door, find out what he can do and go from there."

Mike said he believes his son can accomplish anything he sets his mind to, with, of course, a little help from his friends.

“He’s always had a really good support group of individuals in Liberal and in Olathe,” he said.

Mike said Mason’s story has one simple moral.

“He walked into here not knowing anyone, 1,800 kids, and he did it all on his own,” he said. “He walked right in there shaking hands, and he just did it all by himself. He’s captured all these people. It’s just a great thing to watch.”

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