

# Some Solace in Soccer

After each suffered the loss of one of their children, two families found a semblance of comfort — and a way to honor their children — in the sport that has meant so much to them

By David Pencek



Penn State head men's soccer coach Bob Warming (left) has developed a close friendship with Schreyer Honors College dean Christian Brady (shown with his wife, Elizabeth, and daughter, Izzy) after Brady's son, Mack, died in December from a blood infection. Eight months earlier, Warming's daughter, Audrey, had passed away after a car accident.



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Warming, who is about to start his fourth season as Penn State's head men's soccer coach, says the most important lesson he has learned from the tragedy he and his family have experienced is



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to reach out to people who are suffering from losses.

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Christian Brady, dean of Penn State’s Schreyer Honors College, loved attending Penn State soccer games with his son, Mack, who had dreams of being a goalkeeper for the Nittany Lions and, perhaps one day, the US national team.



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But on December 31, 2012, just 16 days shy of his ninth birthday, Mack died from a blood infection.

“The sad coincidence is, I spent 15 years studying Jewish and Christian responses to lament and suffering and hardship, so I had wrestled with the theological ramifications of the suffering of innocents for over a decade,” says Brady, who also is an ordained priest in the Episcopal Church. “So when this tragedy happened to us, for good or for ill, I was prepared as anyone could be without going through it yourself.”

Brady adds that he doesn’t feel he has all the answers for why tragic events, such as losing his son, happen — and it’s partly there where he and Warming have connected.

The two were acquainted with each other thanks to the Bradys’ attending many of the Nittany Lions’ soccer matches. Brady had even chatted with Audrey several times after soccer practices or other events. Since Mack’s passing, Brady and Warming have become closer and usually talk once a week and will meet for cups of coffee.

Warming says that Brady, like him, “had trouble making sense of it. Initially we got together because I had been through this. The only thing, I told him, was that I have no wisdom for this. I have a shared sorrow with him that we’ve both lost something.”

Brady says, “For me, it’s nice to get together with [Warming] because, sadly, he’s someone who intimately knows what we’re going through.”

From the two losses, two special efforts have been organized by the families — both based around soccer.

Almost immediately after Mack’s passing, the Brady family set up the Mack Brady Soccer Fund, with money going to support Penn State’s goalkeeping program in terms of scholarships, recruitment, and development. As of mid July, the fund had raised more than \$140,000, and, starting this season, the Nittany Lion goalkeepers will wear a patch honoring Mack.

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how the football program is known as Linebacker U, and, in a few years, he hopes we’re going to be known as Goalkeeper U.”

After Audrey’s death, the Warming family decided to help struggling children in Omaha, where Warming had coached for 14 years at Creighton University, turning the program into a national power. Audrey’s Shoes for Kids helps provide soccer shoes and funding for kids from the Omaha Housing Authority who attend the Kicking with the Jays soccer clinic that the soccer team at Creighton hosts. At last year’s clinic, 150 pairs of soccer shoes were given out to kids ages 8 to 18, many of whom come from refugee families from Sudan and Ethiopia.

The organization does exactly what Audrey did for much of her life — help people in need — and the idea came from a conversation she had with her father.



After his daughter died, Warming says the only quote that made sense to him came from something Albert Einstein said — “Energy cannot be created nor destroyed; it can only be changed from one form to another.”

“My daughter had huge energy ... she had unstoppable energy,” Warming says. “Where did all that energy go? Well, it got redirected into something else that also was wonderful.”

During a drive to Pittsburgh with Audrey shortly before her death, Warming and his daughter had noticed several billboards promoting the lottery and how many millions of dollars some-

one could win. They began talking about what they would do if they had won all that money.

Audrey recalled volunteer work she had done in Omaha, including helping a youth soccer clinic the Creighton men’s soccer team (then coached by her father, who started the clinic) held. She had noticed kids participating in the clinic wearing flip-flops, because they were the only pair of shoes they had. She told her father that if she won the lottery, she would like to do something to help those kids.

“She cared a lot for people who didn’t have very much,” Audrey’s mother, Cindy Warming, says. “You could see what she wanted to do — she wanted to make life better.”

When Audrey died, the Warming family — Bob, Cindy, daughters, Emily and Bess, and son (and Audrey’s twin brother), Grant — knew they wanted to do something in Audrey’s name. Bob Warming remembered the conversation he and his daughter had had about winning the lottery.

“It was a crazy time right after her death,” he says. “We talked about different things. It came down to what would Audrey want. ... Let’s start with one thing, and it’s that all kids have a chance to play soccer. You had families who couldn’t afford a pair of regular shoes for their kids, how are they going to afford a pair of soccer shoes? Let’s not be the reason that kids don’t play soccer.”

The organization was set up, and fundraising started immediately. Last August, the clinic was held and the 150 kids who attended received free soccer shoes, shin guards, and socks with the letters ASK (Audrey’s Shoes for Kids) on them.

Bess Warming, who still lives in Omaha where

she is a teacher, oversaw the effort. She says the support Audrey’s Shoes for Kids received didn’t surprise her because of the people of Omaha, and her father, who is still loved there.

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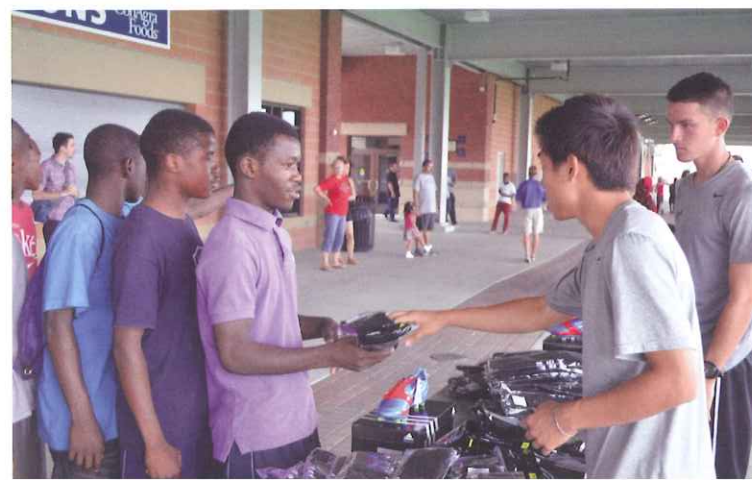
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drey's Shoes for Kids is the best kind of tribute. It's been work, but he appreciates the work it's given him because it's in her name."

On August 17, the second Audrey's Shoes for Kids clinic will be held, and not only will the entire Warming family be there but also the Penn State men's soccer team, who are playing an exhibition game that night against Nebraska-Omaha.

"Family was so centrally important to [Audrey]," says Emily Warming, who lives in Oakland, California. "We're grateful for what we all meant to Audrey. But Audrey had a broad definition of what family is and who family is — and it includes the kids in the Omaha Housing Authority who those shoes are going to."



Family is centrally important to the Brady family, as well. Even to the point where Mack Brady's older sister, Izzy, can still speak honestly about him.

"He was the most irritating person on the face of the earth — he was my little brother," she says, citing times when he would change rules for games they were playing to make sure he won, and how he was always doing something when



**Izzy Brady (left) says her little brother may have irritated her, but she "would not change him for the world."**

she would be content to just sit down and read. "But I would not change him for the world."

Similar to the Warmings' feelings for Audrey, the Bradys wanted to do something positive in Mack's name. They began talking about it on the drive back from Hershey, where Mack had been taken when he was diagnosed with the infection.

"We wanted to remember him when he was alive and vibrant," Christian Brady says. "We spent a lot of time and energy going to soccer games and practices."

Mack began playing soccer when he was 4. It became a passion for him.

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One memory Mack's mother, Elizabeth, has is of the two of them watching a Women's World Cup game, and US keeper Hope Solo diving sideways past an opposing player and grabbing the ball.

"Would you do that?" Elizabeth asked Mack.

"How much do you want to bet me?" Mack answered.

They agreed to \$50, and at one of Mack's next games, he made a move similar to Solo's for a save. When he came to the sidelines, he reminded his mother of the bet.

"He was always up for the challenge," Elizabeth says.

Despite the devastating loss of Mack, the Bradys were up for the challenge of organizing the fund in Mack's name. Christian called Bob Warming on New Year's Day, the day after Mack's passing. They found out they needed \$50,000 to have an endowment.

Christian had a goal of reaching that figure in a year or a year and a half — they achieved that mark in a week.

In addition, Penn State's men's and women's soccer teams held a youth clinic in Mack's name shortly after his death. The two teams also

will each have a "Mack Brady Game" this season — the men's game is September 13 against California and the women's game is September 27 against Purdue.

"There's been a lot of discussion about the Penn State athletic culture," Christian says. "I have found, more often than not, that this is the norm — the support and the love we received."

Elizabeth Brady says, "We had two choices. We could embrace this and live through it and continue to live with his loss, or not. The choice was pretty clear."

Later, she adds that she's learned that "we should slowly learn to celebrate and honor

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Mack's life for what it was — joy filled and full of passion and laughter, and not constantly focus on what we wished it would be."

Christian says that people mourn their dreams and wishes. Mack's dreams of playing for Penn State's soccer team and being a goalkeeper on the US national team are gone in one sense, but alive in another.

"The likelihood of Mack achieving those dreams was probably pretty small," Christian says. "On the other hand, there will always be a Mack Brady goalkeeper now at Penn State. Who knows, there might be a Mack Brady goalkeeper going pro."

As Elizabeth Brady says, unless you've been through the loss of a child, no one exactly knows how to grieve.

The Warming and Brady families continue to grieve, but have found that the energy and passion for life their respective children had is living on in, among other things, Audrey's Shoes for Kids and the Mack Brady Soccer Fund, respectively.

Even with those special efforts, however, the weight of the losses remains.

"You don't get through it — I don't," Bob Warming says. "It's just different. It's not something you ever become OK with — I'll never be

## Recommended Reading

Elizabeth Brady has read several books on grief and mourning since Mack's passing. Here are some that she recommends to people looking for help. "All of these books help because we realize that we are not alone — we are surrounded by suffering and loss," she says.

- *A Grief Observed* by C.S. Lewis
- *When Bad Things Happen to Good People* by Harold Kushner
- *On Children and Death* by Elisabeth Kubler-Ross
- *A Grace Disguised: How the Soul Grows Through Loss* by Jerry Sittser
- *Healing After Loss* by Martha Whitmore Hickman

OK with it. You always miss her."

Christian Brady says, "The more you think about the wonderful things, the more you miss the person. But on the other hand, you don't want to forget those things — that's what makes it bearable." **T&G**

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