

Rising above the clouds of adversity, Oceana senior Cody Hovsepien receives hero recognition

By Jean Bartlett

Aaron "Cody" Hovsepien is a senior at Oceana High School. He's easy to talk to, he's got friends, he is smart and he can be easily described as charismatic. "I get that from my dad who could sell three shoes to a person with two legs," laughs the affable Hovsepien. As to his career goals, he wants to be a child psychologist.

On Friday, Sept. 18, Cody will be among the 10 honored at the Family Service Agency of San Mateo County's annual Winners Breakfast. These 10 "everyday unsung heroes" are local high school students and adults who have triumphed over extreme adversity to succeed and to become role models for their peers. The celebratory event, sponsored by a \$25K grant from Oracle, will be co-hosted by Sydnie Kohara of CBS-5 TV and Don Sanchez of ABC-7 TV. Comedian and KGO radio personality Brian Copeland will be the special guest speaker.



Born in Walnut Creek to heroin-addicted parents, Cody and his family lived there until his parents were kicked out.

"We were Section 8 housing, and it was a nice house as I remember," said Cody. "But my parents were dumb enough to let other people stay with us and you can't do that with Section 8."

His parents split up. Cody, his brother and their dad moved into their paternal grandmother's house in Millbrae. Cody's mom moved in with her dad in Pacifica. Cody began kindergarten at Green Hills Elementary.

His dad was a carpenter/handyman. "He was on and off work but he still provided what I needed," said Cody. "And I was pretty happy."

Cody is not sure if his father was still doing heroin when they lived in Millbrae. "My brother who is seven years older told me he was, but my dad didn't let me see that. I know he was drinking whiskey but I didn't see him drunk. He would drink and fall asleep."

At 7-years-old, Cody was molested by a relative. "My father found out and put me in a therapy group with other kids like me which was lead by a child therapist. The therapy helped and I can honestly say I moved on."

Two months into the fourth grade, Cody was sent to Pacifica to live with his mom and her dad. His paternal grandmother had been diagnosed with Alzheimer's. Cody, who then attended Linda Mar Elementary, thought the move to Pacifica was temporary. When Cody was 10, his dad died. Not from drugs or alcohol but from a combination of factors which included not enough oxygen in his blood.

Cody, who also attended Ingrid B. Lacy, lived with his mother and her father until the end of 10th grade.

"My mother's father was not nice. Because I received monthly survivor benefits from my father's Social Security, my grandfather let me stay because I was rent money. He was verbally abusive and could be physically abusive. Sometimes he would only let me shower once a week and I didn't get dinner that much or food in general."

Cody said it was his neighbors across the street who really looked out for him. They offered him a safe haven and meals. Cody said he definitely considers their daughter to be his little sister.

Additionally Cody said his Aunt Debbie stepped in to help him a lot. "She means the world to me."

At the end of sophomore year, Cody's grandfather kicked both Cody and his mother out. They went to live with his mom's sister-in-law, Gail.

"I packed everything that was important to me: pictures of my friends, my Play Station 2, beads I had gotten that year at SF Pride." (Cody, who came out the summer between 8th grade and high school, is active in Oceana's Gay Straight Alliance.)

But the stay with his aunt didn't last. "My mother wasn't doing heroin but she was doing speed and drinking heavily every day and my aunt just finally had to ask us to leave. She gave us some time to find a place and I just thought; what next."

Cody talked to Ms. Ambrose, special service counselor at Oceana. "Ms. Ambrose really stepped in to help me out." With permission from Cody, Ms. Collins, the Junior and Senior Academic Counselor at Oceana was also brought in to help.

"Ms. Collins knew this couple from her church, Lisa and Karen. They have a daughter and a son. We all met in March of 2009 to see what we thought of each other. They liked me and I liked them and I moved in with them during spring break."

How does Cody feel about them now? "I love them. They are my moms. It's like I found my long lost parents. And I love my brother and sister. We have two dogs and four cats. I have a real family now."

Cody said his moms are typical parents. "They get involved. They give me chores. I get in trouble when I am supposed to. They get worried if I don't call," Cody laughs. "And they call me constantly asking me where am I, tell me they love me and to call them back!"

Cody said his "academic" mom attended Oceana's Back to School Night on the 8th and his "financial" mom will attend the college "financial aid" information night in October.

"I want to go to San Diego for college, but I will also apply to nine other schools. Ms. Collins gave all the seniors a pack of college stuff which includes information on community colleges, CSUs and UCs. Ms. Ambrose told me about The Point Foundation which I will also apply for. (The Point Foundation, www.thepointfoundation.org, provides scholarships, mentorship, leadership training and hope for students of merit who have been marginalized due to sexual orientation, gender identity or gender expression.)

Cody said Oceana has provided him a real sense of self through education. "It has been a good school for me in so many ways. They teach you to see not just the black and white of the world, but the grey in between. In 10th grade we learned about genocide. We studied the Armenian Genocide (Cody points out his last name, Hovsepian is Armenian), we studied the Holocaust and the Rape of Nanking. Of course there were other things we studied, but these really have a deep impact."

As a Junior, Cody experienced the Sojourn To The Past Project (www.sojournproject.org), a 10-day bus, educational tour through pivotal sites in the South where Civil Rights History was made and where students meet 14 of the men and women who shaped the movement. "It made me see that this country is not all peachy keen and we have our dirty secrets. So often we stick our noses in other countries where it doesn't belong. We have enough of our own problems!"

Through his own life's dilemmas, Cody said he has learned to never surrender. He said that even if it sounds "cheesy" he recommends that kids with tough home lives: don't give up, do their homework and fight, fight, fight! He also said that exercise is a great stress reliever. He works out daily for 90 minutes.

Cody's not quite sure what he thinks about, in his words, "being honored for having a trouble life and surviving it" — an honor he knows that Ms. Ambrose is behind. "My mom Karen is making me dress up," smiled Cody. "I guess it's actually pretty cool."

"I used to look at the 'American family' and think: two kids, one set of parents, a dog and everyone is happy. I have that now, alternative style. My parents love me for who I am and I really consider myself lucky."

The Family Service Agency of San Mateo County and Oracle's 14th Annual Winners Breakfast will be held on Friday, Sept. 18, 2009 from 7 to 9 a.m. at the Crowne Plaza Cabana Hotel & Resort, 4290 El Camino Real, Palo Alto. Tickets are \$50 adults, \$25 children and seniors. They can be purchased by calling 650-403-4300 X4401 or online by visiting www.familyserviceagency.org.