

CCHS SENIOR SPARKS IDEAS & WELDS THEM INTO REALITY



Above: Sam and Van Kalinisan on the deck in the back of their Bells home.



Above: Sam in his workshop, where he shows some of the pink ribbons he has made for breast cancer awareness.

By Ron Barry

When Sam Kalinisan gets an idea in his head, it's a pretty sure thing he'll find a way to make it become a reality.

It's even more likely to happen when the idea is also supported by Sam's father Van, who loves to help Sam accomplish his dreams.

A tremendous example of the Kalinisan teamwork will be on display Friday night at Cavalier Stadium in Alamo when the Crockett County football team stages a "Pink-Out" for its Senior Night celebration, bringing awareness to support for breast cancer research and fundraising while also honoring the memory of Sam's late mother Rachel, who died from the disease in 2016.

Sam Kalinisan – the last name is of Filipino origin and is pronounced KAL-e-NEE-san – is currently a senior at CCHS and is a member of the football team. During the summer, he asked his father why the squad didn't wear pink jerseys for a game in October like they did nine years ago to raise awareness of breast cancer.

"I just remembered when I was little they did this, and all the kids like me looked up to the players so much," Sam says. Van began doing some research and discovered that the pink jersey night was a statewide campaign by an insurance company, but the firm had moved on to supporting St. Jude Children's Research Hospital since.

"St. Jude is a great cause as well," Van says, "but Sam had an idea to try to outfit the team for Senior Night this year. He was disappointed when I told him what I found out, but I also told him not to give up on me."

Van, a former "Navy brat" who went to four different high schools in three countries and two states when he was growing up, put his marketing background into play while putting his head together with Sam's to figure out what they could do together to make Sam's dream happen.

They learned that a quality game jersey for a high school team would cost about \$50 to be custom-made. With approximately 80 players to outfit, that put a price tag of \$4,000 on the project. Initial visits and calls to businesses, Sam says, weren't very productive.

But Van approached his local bank (The Bank of Crockett) and made his pitch. All of a sudden, they were halfway to their goal. From there, with their confidence rising, the Kalinisans began piecing together pledges from numerous businesses and a few individual donors, and eventually had enough money to not only dress the football team in pink, but also the coaches, cheerleaders, managers, ball boys, and the school band.

"Coach Kevin Ward was instrumental in helping us get this done, first by giving Sam's idea his blessing and then by throwing his full support behind everything we've done," Van says. "Without his help, none of this would have become a reality, especially when we hit the snag on the project date."

The "snag" was that Manassas High School in Memphis – Crockett's scheduled opponent for the October 13 game which would feature the "Pink-Out" – notified Ward on September 11 that it was backing out of its commitment to play the game, citing financial stresses. So, a month out, with jersey orders in, money collected, and plans beginning to solidify, suddenly the Cavaliers had no one to play that night.

The problem was compounded by the fact that the TSSAA only allows schools to play 10 regular season games. Ward was faced with trying to find an opponent who not only had a less-than-full schedule already, but had an open date on October 13. He called around, but told Van he'd come up empty.

By now you've learned that Van does not give up easily on things he's determined to do. A member of Freed-Hardeman University's Athletic Hall of Fame from his pitching days there, Van called a former teammate he knew from his baseball time in Millington, where he attended high school as a senior. That friend, after checking around a little bit himself, suggested Ward call PURE Academy, an independent school in Memphis that wasn't bound to the 10-game rule and had already played Haywood and Obion County Central this season. Ward did, PURE agreed to step in, and the project was back on.

If it hadn't happened, alternative plans were discussed about combining the "Pink-Out" with the Homecoming game on September 29, which was really going to crowd delivery time on the jerseys and also threaten to have the meaning of the effort get lost in the shuffle of all the other activities.

"It wouldn't have been fair to the others who were already planning Homecoming events," Van says, "but when PURE agreed to play, we were back in business."

As word of the "Pink-Out" effort spread, the volleyball and golf teams managed to get involved as well, with more sponsorships and the help of players' parents enabling both of those squads to play matches in pink. The fact that the soccer team only had tournament games set for October was the sole thing that kept it from being able to participate.

Sam's vision for the game, while highlighting breast cancer awareness, is more than just an honoring of his mother, who died when he was 10. He also wanted a special significance placed on his senior teammates, because he feels this particular group of players is unique.

"This group of seniors has been special," Sam says. "The way they lead the team, the responsibility they show, and the bonds they've formed deserve to be highlighted. I just thought this would be a great way to do that." And by now, if you think Van is the only enterprising Kalinisan in the family, you perhaps have not yet heard of Flying Sparks Art - a metal works design business whose CEO and chief welder is none other than Sam himself.

"When I was a freshman, I took a manufacturing class," Sam says. "One of the things we did was to learn to weld. Very early on, I was working in class on something, and Mr. (Rusty) McKnight, the instructor, held up the piece I was welding and used it as an example to everyone else on how it was supposed to be done. That was the beginning of my love for this, and it was all because my teacher gave me some confidence."

"You never know what a little praise from a teacher or a coach can do for a young person," Van says. "Sometimes, that's all it takes to put a student on the right path."

As Sam's confidence grew, so did his imagination, and one day he made a flower out of horseshoes. After taking 78 orders in his first three days of "marketing" the design, Sam knew he suddenly had a business venture on his hands, which naturally kindled Van's "support" mechanism.

"I just began trying to find ways to help Sam further the business," Van says. "I try to help him with obtaining needed equipment and supplies, and he makes all the designs and final products."

Sam's initial flower design has now been joined by seasonal things such as Christmas trees, Thanksgiving turkeys, and Halloween pumpkins, as well as family yard signs, football support signs ("Go Vols," "Roll Tide," "Hail State," etc.), breast cancer awareness ribbons, and other custom orders. All of them incorporate horseshoes - to date the Kalinisans estimate he's used more than 10,000 of them - but Sam wants to make perfectly clear that he isn't limited to them.

"I don't have to do just horseshoe stuff," he says. "I can weld other things, so if anyone has something they'd like me to make for them, all they have to do is pitch it to me."

Back to the "Pink-Out" idea. Both Kalinisans would like for it to return to being an annual affair in October, which is designated as Breast Cancer Awareness Month.

"I'm not sure how we'd do it, but here's what I'd like to see," Van says. "At the game Friday night, on their way to the concession stand or wherever, if every fan in attendance would consider giving just one dollar to the Crockett Touchdown Club, we could start a fund that would cover the cost of this annually. This community has been so good to help make this one a reality. I'd sure love to see it continue, both to honor Rachel and to support all those who are survivors or who have been affected by this disease. And we know it touches just about every family in some way."

While Sam and Van recognize there have been some donations that were made by individuals or anonymously, they would like to spotlight and express appreciation to those for which they have a definite record of a donation: The Bank of Crockett; Bells Depot LLC (Raines Pharmacy); Cavalier Pharmacy; Mosier Family Fitness; Longworth PPC; El Molcajete Restaurant of Bells; Alamo Learning Academy; Foundation Bank of Bells; El Mexicano Restaurant of Alamo; The Spot eatery (Bells); Renasant Bank of Bells; All Seasons Refrigeration; Troy Mathews of Farm Bureau; Josh Dillon (nephew of Rachel Dillon Kalinisan); DJ Brewer of Medina Funeral Home & Cremation Service; Walnut Hill Estates; Alamo Construction Company; Bells Hardware Company; Chad Williams, dba Logistic Solutions; Burger Basket of Bells; Jasper Taylor; William Martin Construction; Mighty Auto Parts; Chris Sherrod Hutchison of Crye-Leike Blue Skies Real Estate; Crockett Medical; and Williams Steel.

"Crockett County really is the best," Van says, and thanks everyone for putting this project in the pink.



Above: Sam's Flying Sparks Art also features custom pieces he makes by request, like this cross with a heart



Left: Sam Kalinisan sits on his front steps at his Bells home, with his supportive father Van standing behind him.