



Great expectations

Class of 2000, a five-day serial published by *The Amarillo Globe-News*

Day 1 of 5

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Editor's note:

The high school class of 2000 has never known a president other than Reagan, Bush or Clinton. Born in 1981 and 1982, this year's crop of graduating seniors has grown up having to pass Texas Assessment of Academic Skills test to advance to the next grade. For them, "no-pass, no-play" has always been the law of the land.

Personal computers, still a new phenomenon for many of us, were introduced the year most of them were born. Instant communication. Instant gratification. These are qualities that older generations associate with today's teen-agers.

The Amarillo Globe-News has chosen to take a closer look at the class of 2000, the leaders of the 21st century. For the past nine months, Special Projects Writer Sonny Bohanan went back to school. Specifically, he went back to Tascosa High School, his alma mater, in an effort to understand the members of the Class of 2000—their dreams, their hopes, their fears.

He chose Tascosa because it is a microcosm of the city that surrounds it. Built 41 years ago in west Amarillo, Tascosa roughly mirrors the racial and socioeconomic makeup of Amarillo.

Bohanan has focused his five-day series on five seniors who agreed to open their lives to public inspection, students who represent a wide spectrum of interests and abilities.

By SONNY BOHANAN
Special Projects Writer

Steven Lee

Steven Lee sits alone on the first day of school, front and center in Rick Devoe's classroom. Several other students are in clusters around the class, but Steven has strategically placed himself next to Devoe's desk, a measure of his devotion to the man he calls "Doc."

Dr. Devoe, whose title derives from his Ph.D. in ancient history, is delivering his first-day lecture on the benefits and rigors of the Advanced Placement humanities class that these seniors have chosen.

The students, the best and the brightest that Tascosa High School has to offer, earn concurrent college credit for AP classes, and Devoe is not above a few scare tactics to make sure they don't take the class or their status for granted.

"In AP courses, the attrition rate is phenomenal—almost 50 percent," Devoe says.

The students have coasted through five years of secondary schooling and haven't been challenged, he says. That changes now.

"The regular curriculum is tied to the TAAS test, which is eighth-grade competency," Devoe says. "AP classes are on the level of freshmen and sophomores in college. That's a five-year difference."

Steven isn't worried. He's had Devoe's AP classes before and takes pride in his ability to make A's in what are essentially college courses. In fact, he hopes the class will weed out the lesser students. Nothing irks him more than teachers who spoon-feed their students.

As the school year opens, Steven is ranked 27th in his class of some 400 seniors, with a grade-point average of 95.2951. He's confident he can improve his ranking with the extra points that AP classes provide.

Steven has loaded up on courses to prepare him for college, including the AP humanities class, business computer programming, Physics II and English IV, another AP class. He also takes a class on the weekends to help him raise his SAT score. Steven is a member of six organizations: Academic Decathlon, Science Bowl, Business Professionals of America, National Honor Society, choir, and he's captain of the fencing team.

Devoe coaches the fencing team, known as the Rebel Blades. Steven is bitter about the disparity in funding and recognition between fencing and other sports.

"I don't like the way the football team is favored among other sports and clubs around school," Steven says. "Our fencing team is, like, three-year state champions, but we don't get funded at all because we're not UIL (University Interscholastic League) recognized. The football team gets more than fencing and other clubs do, but look at their record. They're pretty spoiled in that respect.

"If the football team beats Amarillo High, there's all this hype, people are cheering. But if another team beats Amarillo High, it's not the same recognition."

Devoe does nothing to dispel Steven's notion that Tascosa High School places too much emphasis on football.

“Nearly 20 percent of the teaching staff are coaches at any Texas public school,” Devoe says. “The highest paid nonadministrative personnel is the head football coach.

“When the highest paid person is the head of the math department, then we’re getting somewhere.”

Natasha Baker

Natasha Baker and her friends eat lunch at the same table every day in the school cafeteria. From their vantage point they can watch each drama as it unfolds in the cafeteria or the adjoining commons area.

“We’ve been eating at this table for four years,” she says. The students at the table are all black, though Tasha, as her friends and family call her, moves easily in all social circles at Tascosa.

She is popular, usually surrounded by friends, and they cut loose at lunchtime, taking pictures of each other, teasing, listening when one breaks into a rap song.

Administrators don’t care for the singing, especially when the students gather in a large group and stand on the tables and chairs. On this day, a large group has formed around two boys who are singing rhymes of their own invention.

From the outside, it’s impossible to tell what is happening in the center of the circle. Fearing a fight has broken out, a teacher intervenes and disperses the crowd.

One of the boys grows indignant. “We have a constitutional right to rap,” he says loudly, standing up and poking his finger into the tabletop. “This is our First Amendment right!”

The teacher finally gets the noisy group to disband, but only a couple of minutes later, the rapping begins again.

This time, assistant principal Shawn Neeley steps in to break it up. The students ignore him, but the bell rings and everyone finally moves on to class, ending a situation that had begun to grow tense.

“They should just let us alone,” Tasha says. “This is the only time we get to be ourselves.”

It’s 1 o’clock, and Tasha has already finished school for the day. She has a marketing class that requires the students to work 15 hours a week, and they get out of class early to make time for their jobs.

She works about 20 hours a week selling clothing at T.J. Maxx. The job is a natural for Tasha, who loves to shop and spends \$50 to \$100 a week on her wardrobe. Her paycheck also helps to pay for the long-distance phone bill she racks up each month talking to Paul Antoine Petty, her boyfriend of almost three years. He is from Amarillo but is attending school at South Plains

College in Levelland. They began dating when they worked together in Amarillo, but he moved to Quanah when his mother died in a house fire.

They have continued their relationship, though Tasha isn't exactly sitting at home waiting for him to call. She goes out often with her friends, and she admits that she has had other romantic interests while dating Petty.

"I think I'm cute, so I just keep messing with other guys," she says.

That's just fine with Tasha's grandmother, Jean Washington. She doesn't want Tasha in a serious relationship while she's still in high school.

"She says, 'I don't want you to have a boyfriend anyway. Just date around,'" Tasha says.

Tasha, her four brothers and her sister live at their grandparents' tidy house on North Florida Street. Tasha's mother lives there, too.

Tasha's father is in prison, and she refuses to be a part of his life. She hasn't seen him since she was 9. He writes her letters, but "I just throw them away," she says. He is scheduled to be released in July 2000.

Jason Edwards

The hallway outside coach Johnny Cobb's office is beginning to get crowded. It happens about this time every day, 2:45 p.m., when the wrestlers report to seventh period, and half a dozen of them stand at the door of his office and compete for his attention.

"I want you guys to get suited out," Cobb says, but none of them leave. "We start workout in," he looks at his watch, "five minutes."

"Coach, I didn't get my physical yet," one of the boys says, holding the form that each wrestler must have filled out by a doctor to attest that he is healthy enough to take part in the grueling sport.

The boy has taken a step inside Cobb's office.

"Give me 10," Cobb says. "You know the rules. No one steps into my office without permission."

The boy drops down on the office floor and does 10 push-ups. Before he's finished, two other kids have interjected.

"Can I use your phone?"

"Coach, I can't find my shorts. I think my locker mate left our locker undone and someone stole them."

“They’ve got a number on them, don’t they?” Cobb asks. “Look around and see if anyone is wearing them. See if they got put in the laundry.”

Before long, several kids have inched their way into his office, and Cobb has given up on making them do push-ups. The crowd parts as Jason Edwards, one of the team captains, makes his way into the office. Jason is one of only three seniors, a team leader who has qualified for the state tournament each of the past three years.

Adolf Ortega, a state runner-up the previous year, is the other captain. Together, they help Cobb ride herd on the younger wrestlers, an unruly group of 55 kids who vary in size from less than 100 pounds to more than 250.

Jason has his sights set on winning a state championship this season. It’s his last chance. His best finish was as a freshman, when he took sixth place at state.

It’s no easy burden, leading the Rebels. Tascosa has long been a powerhouse in wrestling, winning the state championship in 1998 and finishing second in 1999 with three high-school All-Americans on the team: Buck McLamb, Aaron Baker, and Brett Robinson.

But Cobb knows this will be a tough season. All three of Tascosa’s state champions graduated, and only three seniors are on this year’s squad—Jason, Adolf and Jeff Pair.

Jason and Adolf are Cobb’s great hopes for the 2000 season. And in practice, they don’t disappoint.

Assistant coach Kenny Medling puts the team through push-up drills. Each wrestler must do as many push-ups as possible in 30 seconds; after a short rest, they do push-ups for 20 seconds; then 15 seconds; and so on.

Jason and Adolf bob up and down effortlessly. Many of the others struggle to do 10 or 15 push-ups; Adolf manages 54 in 30 seconds, then 35 in 20 seconds. The acrid smell of 55 sweating bodies fills the wrestling room, as former state champions look down from their photographs on the wall.

Some kids have given up and are simply lying face-down on the red and black wrestling mats, but Jason and Adolf are not even breathing hard when they finish. They are fit. They are toned. They are ready for the season.

Carmen Venegas

School is far from Carmen Venegas’ mind during the first week of her senior year. In fact, she doesn’t attend a single class. She is at home instead, worried about her future.

It’s been a long, troubled summer for Carmen and her boyfriend of more than a year, Jacob Gonzalez, ever since they found out in May that Carmen is pregnant. Carmen at first tries to deny the symptoms: sickness every morning, emotions out of whack.

“Why am I crying so much?” she wonders. “Why am I getting mad so easy?”

Finally, she makes an appointment with Planned Parenthood, where her fears are confirmed.

Carmen is bitter about the fact that she became pregnant the only time she had sex with her boyfriend. And she fears her mother’s reaction to the news—so much so that she hides the pregnancy.

“We went through so much at the beginning,” Carmen says later. “Jacob was in shock, and he didn’t want to believe it. We were fighting a lot, and I was crying all the time.”

In June, a terrible argument erupts between Carmen and her mother, Evelyn Mendoza. Evelyn forbids Carmen to see Jacob and sends her daughter, who recently turned 17, to live with Evelyn’s mother in Hedley.

Carmen, now three months into her pregnancy at the end of June, and Jacob still haven’t told anyone that she is pregnant. In Hedley, Carmen gets so lonely that she persuades her grandmother to pick up Jacob in Amarillo and drive him to Hedley for a week at the beginning of July.

On July 4, as Carmen and Jacob watch television in the living room, she hears a car honk out front. It’s Evelyn, her mother.

“Jacob, hide in the bathroom, hide in the bathroom,” Carmen screams. Jacob resists. He wants to tell Carmen’s mother the truth. Carmen disagrees, shouting, “Go to the bathroom, go to the bathroom.”

He relents and locks himself in the bathroom as Evelyn comes to the door. She wants to take Carmen to lunch for the Fourth of July, and Carmen, her mother, little sister and grandmother leave for the restaurant. After they eat and buy some fireworks, Evelyn drops them off and leaves for Amarillo. What Carmen doesn’t know is that her little sister has seen a pair of boys’ shoes in the house and has secretly mentioned it to their mother.

“Thank God she didn’t come in,” Carmen thinks after Evelyn drives away.

With the crisis averted, Carmen and Jacob return to the living room together, but Evelyn drives up again outside. Jacob runs to the bathroom again, and when Evelyn enters the house, he retreats to a closet.

Evelyn races into the bedroom and finds him. Carmen can hide her secret no more.

“Mom, I’m pregnant,” she yells, sobbing.

Evelyn studies her daughter’s face.

“I knew there was something wrong,” she says. “I knew why you were sick all the time.”

Evelyn becomes more angry as she absorbs the news. She tells Carmen to stay with her grandmother in Hedley, and Evelyn drives Jacob back to Amarillo. She lectures him all the way, for more than an hour. She tells Jacob he is going to get a house and take care of Carmen and support her. Jacob agrees to everything. He loves Carmen and will take care of her, he says.

Two weeks later, Carmen calls her mother and asks if she can move back home. School will be starting in mid-August, and Carmen is lonely and scared.

Evelyn agrees to let Carmen come home, but she again forbids her daughter from seeing Jacob or talking to him on the phone.

“Jacob was always trying to call me, but my mom would hang up on him,” Carmen says later. “If my mom left the house, I had to go with her. She made sure she was with me all the time. She made my little brother or sister go with me to the store. She kept us apart for a month. I was mad. I was crying all the time.”

As school begins Aug. 16, Carmen is worried and confused. She considers putting the baby up for adoption. She doesn't attend a single class during the first week of school. She frets over whether to keep the baby, crying and wondering why such tragedy has been visited upon her.

Carmen grows more sullen and upset. Does she love Jacob? Jacob tells her over and over that he loves her, but she's not sure if she feels the same. “I don't know if I really know what love is,” she says. But she does know that she cannot give up the baby for adoption. Already four months pregnant, she'd be unable to part with the infant after carrying it inside her for nine months.

After making her decision, Carmen feels at peace for the first time in months.

Sarah Harrison

Sarah Harrison begins her senior year with a 99.55 grade-point average, the second-highest in her class. But on this warm September afternoon, she feels like giving up.

The test paper in front of her is certain to drop her physics grade, and her GPA along with it. She wishes she had spent more time studying for this test.

If I drop my GPA, she thinks, I won't get a good scholarship. Her breath comes in short gasps, and she starts wheezing.

Though it is early in the semester, the stress of school is already building. Sarah spends two or three hours a night studying and reading class assignments, and she has plenty of other activities that eat up the rest of her time: National Honor Society, Student Council, Academic Decathlon, the cross-country track team, U'n'I Smart & Safe (an anti-drug, anti-violence student group), Tascosa Focus (a program to teach students to make good choices), Peer Assistance Leadership tutoring at Lamar Elementary School, Science Bowl, UIL Literary Criticism, and Key Club. And whenever possible, she spends evenings hanging out with her friends at Dante's Espresso and Dessert Bar on Bell Street.

Usually, the pressure doesn't bother Sarah. She's never earned lower than an A in her time at Tascosa High School, and she knows that one test in physics won't noticeably affect her GPA. But Sarah is driven to achieve, at least partly because she wants to get into a good college.

"I will apply for all the scholarships I can," she says. "That's probably the only way I can go to college."

As a freshman she decided that she wanted to attend Harvard, but as her senior year begins, she has changed her mind. She is confused about where to go.

She now plans to apply at Baylor, University of Texas, University of Virginia, Vanderbilt, Bellhaven, a private Presbyterian college in Mississippi, and Wellesley, a liberal arts college near Boston.

Sarah is trying to decide whether to retake the SAT, a college-entrance exam. She took it in June 1999, after her junior year, but she doesn't like to talk about her score.

"It's not stellar," she says.

Her score became a sore point last summer between Sarah and one of her friends, Chuck Ledwig, the student body president.

They each had set a goal of scoring at least 1300 points, out of a possible 1600. After taking the exam last summer, Sarah overhears Chuck's mother talking about his score. To Sarah's dismay, Chuck had outscored her.

Later, when Sarah and Chuck were together with friends, the conversation turned to SAT scores. Sarah grew quiet, until Chuck asked what she made.

"I can't tell you," Sarah said. "But I didn't score as high as you."

She is still unhappy about her score.

"I just can't accept it," she says. "I don't want to tell anyone. If it's not good for me, I'm not going to let anyone know."

Still to come in the series:

Monday: Jason Edwards pays his debt and rejoins the wrestling team. With a baby on the way, Carmen Venegas' mind is on the future.

Tuesday: Sarah Harrison and others at Tascosa are in shock after a car crash seriously injures five Tascosa students. Sometimes her love life grows so complicated, Natasha Baker lies awake nights thinking, trying to keep her stories straight.

Wednesday: Carmen Venegas' trip to Toys R Us turns tragic. Jason Edwards travels to Austin for his final shot at a state championship.

Thursday: As graduation nears, Natasha Baker is ready to break away—from school, from home, from Amarillo. Sarah Harrison addresses Tascosa High School's 431 graduating seniors.



The Big Game

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Day 2 of 5

Monday, June 26, 2000

By SONNY BOHANAN
Special Projects Writer

Steven Lee

The Tascosa Rebels have won only one football game all year, and the prospect of beating the undefeated Amarillo High Sandies is slim.

It is Nov. 6, the day of the annual Tascosa-AHS game.

The rivalry between the two schools has evolved into an annual event known as Hell Week, during which no vehicle at or near the school is safe from paint balls and eggs.

Though Steven Lee rarely attends Tascosa football games, he promises his girlfriend, Lyndi Williams, he will come to the last game of the season.

But Steven hasn't come to watch football. Lyndi is the drum major in the Tascosa band and has a starring role in the halftime show.

Lyndi and Steven have been dating since Sept. 26. They met when they were sophomores and had one date that year, when they ate at Subway together. But Steven disputes the idea that it was a date.

“I hang out with my friends all the time—that doesn’t mean we’re dating,” he says.

He doesn’t dispute their current dating status.

Lyndi was the one who first asked him out. She had been scheduled to go on a double date, but her guy had to cancel. So Lyndi walked up to Steven in choir class and asked him whether he would like to go to a movie.

Steven accepted, and a month and a half later, they have slipped into a comfortable routine. Though they have only one class together—choir—Steven walks Lyndi to class whenever possible, and he sometimes slips her notes and poems when they pass in the hall.

They have their disagreements. Steven sometimes angers Lyndi, and others, with his competitive drive for grades and with his views on religion (he doesn’t believe in God).

One night, while they’re eating dinner at the Catfish Shack restaurant, the conversation turns to college. Steven has applied to St. John’s, an exclusive liberal arts college in Santa Fe, N.M. He has ample family funding to bankroll his education, and he also hopes to get scholarship money.

Lyndi, meanwhile, plans to attend Amarillo College to study music, and she seems jealous of the financial advantages available to Steven.

“I have to pay for my school,” Lyndi says.

“I’m paying for mine, too,” Steven says. “I plan to pay for college with scholarships, at least most of it. So the work I’m doing right now in school is directly related to paying for college.”

“You’re always flaunting your intelligence,” Lyndi says angrily.

Steven makes no apologies for his attitude. He works hard at school, and he never shies from class discussions, contributing his thoughts and opinions in all situations.

“I participate more than my fair share in class,” he admits. He doesn’t care if that bothers his fellow-students.

“We’ll see when we find out who gets accepted to what colleges,” Steven says. “School is my deal. Other people have things like sports, or drinking alcohol, or whatever they do. School is mine.”

Steven has never taken a drink in his life. He lives with his grandmother, Betty Deckard, who considers Steven's choice a blessing because alcoholism runs in the family, she says.

But Steven takes a libertarian view of students who choose to drink.

"I've never seen the need to drink," he says. "I don't want to lose control of my faculties. But I don't see a problem with underage drinking that much, as long as it doesn't infringe on anyone else.

"If a teen wants to sit at home and drink and fall asleep on the couch, I have no problem with that. The minute they walk outside the door and their senses are dulled and they're not in complete control of themselves, and they interact with other people, then it becomes more than that."

On the day of the Tascosa-Amarillo High game, Steven watches from the west side of Dick Bivins Stadium, at the north end of the bleachers where the Tascosa students gather for each home game.

The Saturday afternoon game is sun-drenched, blessed by warm, almost hot, weather. School administrators keep a watchful eye on the student section, and one of them, Marcia Parr, notices that several students have on matching white T-shirts.

Upon closer inspection, Parr discovers that the shirts have a cartoon of a naked AHS cheerleader with the Rebel kid positioned suggestively behind her, and Parr makes her way into the stands, confiscating the shirts.

Steven and several of his friends are among the guilty parties. He is angered by having to surrender his shirt to Parr, though he and most of the other students, anticipating this, have worn an extra shirt underneath or tied one around their waist.

The game ends in a 48-7 loss for Tascosa, ending the Rebels' season with a 1-9 record, the worst in school history.

Steven walks out the north end of the stadium where the two football teams are already boarding buses for the ride back to their respective schools. Several players on the Amarillo High bus laugh derisively at the dejected Tascosa students as the bus moves slowly through the parking lot, but Steven doesn't notice. He's still grumbling about losing the T-shirt and is determined to get it back.

"I paid \$15 for that shirt," he says. "They should have made me turn it inside out or put on another shirt."

The next week at school, he learns that Associate Principal David Vincent will be happy to return the shirt—if Steven’s grandmother comes to school to retrieve it.

Steven rejects that idea and decides he will simply take something worth \$15 from the high school.

“If I see a really good textbook that I like, I’ll just take it,” he says.

But then he thinks better of it.

“The school did buy my letter jacket for me,” he says, thinking out loud. “It probably cost \$150.” In the end, he resigns himself to having lost the shirt.

Natasha Baker

The closed-circuit television sets hum to life in each classroom at Tascosa High School. It is third period on Sept. 10, time for the daily video announcements.

On this Friday, the students have many decisions to make. Candidates for homecoming king and queen, Miss Tascosa Belle, and class officers are making their pitches with prerecorded videos during the announcements, and students will vote today.

Natasha Baker sits in her third-period economics class and watches her own face pop up on the screen. She has been nominated for homecoming queen, along with Meredith Cone, Kammi Hill, Tiffany Hilliard, Lexia Howard, Amber Roberts, Shanna Sierra and Morgan Tuckness.

A week later, Tasha receives a piece of paper from the school office informing her she is one of three finalists. She and the other two—Kammi Hill and Tiffany Hilliard—gather in Maureen Geiger’s classroom to practice for the ceremony, set for Sept. 24 during halftime of the Tascosa-Clovis football game at Dick Bivins Stadium.

Each girl is asked to choose the crown of her choice—either a plain white one with clear stones, or a white one with red stones. Natasha chooses the one with red stones, and the girls rehearse their parts.

On the night of the homecoming game, a full moon rises above the east side of the stadium, casting a glow over the beautiful autumn night.

Tascosa opens the game with a 7-0 lead, but Clovis scores twice to go ahead 10-7 at halftime. Tasha leaves her seat to change into a formal black dress with large red roses printed on it.

Tasha’s uncle, Frank Washington, waits with her at the top of the ramp on the north end of the stadium. As the ceremony begins, he and Tasha walk down the ramp, arm in arm, and around the

track to the west side of the field. There, Tasha joins arms with Marcos Castillo, a football player who is one of three finalists for homecoming king, and her uncle waits by the side.

The homecoming king is announced first, and Marcos, the winner, steps forward. Then the public address announcer reveals the “homecoming queen for 1999-2000—Natasha Baker.”

Tasha’s uncle is handed a bouquet of flowers just before her name is announced, and he takes the flowers to Tasha. Tascosa principal Bob Daniel places the crown on her head.

Tasha basks in the moment. She didn’t realize just how good it would feel for all eyes to be on her. “It was the best moment in the whole world,” she recalls later.

Her grandmother, Jean Washington, is beaming from the stands, along with Tasha’s mother, her four brothers, her sister and her aunt. Camera flashes go off, and then it’s time for Tasha and Marcos to walk off the field and back up the ramp.

Tasha is the first black homecoming queen in the 41-year history of Tascosa High School. One of her friends, Tamikka Williams, is voted Miss Tascosa Belle, also the first black girl to win that honor.

Tasha was so surprised to win that she nearly cried.

“I figured Kammi Hill would win,” Tasha says afterward. “She’s a varsity cheerleader. But I have a lot of friends.”

Tasha is honored to have broken the racial barrier at the school.

“I wanted to have something to be remembered by,” she says. “At first, everybody made a big deal out of it, us being the first black girls to win in 41 years.

“It was fun to me. I didn’t do it to make a statement.”

Tasha hopes it will inspire other black girls to run for homecoming queen in the future.

After the game, Tasha and Steve Jackson go to the homecoming dance together. Tasha’s friends tell her she’d better wear the crown as much as possible that night, because she will have to give it back. But Mrs. Geiger assures Tasha that she can keep the crown forever.

Jason Edwards

Jason Edwards hopes someday to be a broadcaster on ESPN’s SportsCenter.

The stocky senior with a thick brow and freckled skin doesn't necessarily look the part. His head, when shaved almost to the scalp, gives him a somewhat menacing aspect.

As part of his second-period media class, Jason helps produce the school's daily video announcements. His jobs range from running the TelePrompTer and writing the announcements to reading them in front of the camera.

His career goal is a natural outgrowth of his lifelong love of sports.

He began wrestling at age 4 at the Maverick Club. He played flag football in elementary school and was starting quarterback for the Sam Houston Rangers football team in middle school. He won golf tournaments at the ages of 13 and 14, though he stopped playing when his clubs were stolen. He was an all-district selection on the Rebel baseball team as a junior, and he plays adult league softball every summer.

But in high school, Jason has focused primarily on wrestling. After qualifying for the state tournament each of the past three years, he is pinning his hopes on finally winning a state championship on his last opportunity.

Jason is disappointed that his father, Carl Edwards, won't be able to watch him wrestle this year. Carl is in prison in Plainview following a DWI conviction when Jason was 15.

Carl had previously been given a probated sentence for marijuana possession. When he was arrested again for drunken driving, his probation was revoked and he was sentenced to four years in prison.

Jason's parents split up when he was 13, and he lived with his father until he was 15. At the end of his freshman year, Jason moved in with his mother, Janet Morris, a thin woman with glasses who works the overnight shift as a machine operator at Crouse Hinds. Lately, she's been working 10 hours a day, six days a week.

Neither of Jason's parents graduated from high school. Morris dropped out at 16, when she became pregnant with Jason. She worked for 14 years at Maywood, the former door and window manufacturer, before it went bankrupt. She was grateful to land the job at Crouse Hinds.

But she wants something better for her only child.

"I just hope he'll stay on the right track and make something of himself," she says. "I want him to get a job he likes, something he doesn't have to worry about all the time."

Jason has a part-time job at Hospitality Food Service, keeping the concession stands stocked during events at the Amarillo Civic Center. It pays \$5.25 an hour.

On Thursday, Sept. 16, Jason reports to work after wrestling practice. At the end of his shift, he drinks several beers with co-workers before driving to a football game under way at Dick Bivins Stadium, where Tascosa is playing Randall High School.

On the way to the game he drinks several more. By the time he arrives at the stadium, he has consumed about eight beers.

He joins other Tascosa students at the far north end of the bleachers and watches the end of the first half and part of the third quarter. The Rebels have run up a 21-3 halftime lead and are poised to win their first football game of the year.

But Jason won't be around to see the victory.

Near the end of the third quarter, Jason notices an argument nearby involving one of his wrestling buddies, Paul Perez. Jason, in an effort to stand up for Paul, gets in the middle of the argument and eventually takes it over entirely.

Shouting and becoming more animated, Jason challenges the other teen-agers to a fight—all of them. Tempers escalate quickly until Amarillo police officer Brian Thomas and Tascosa associate principal David Vincent arrive on the scene.

Thomas, the school liaison officer at Tascosa, smells the beer on Jason's breath. The police officer moves a pen in front of Jason's face as part of a sobriety test. He tells Jason to get a ride home and to report to the office at Tascosa the next morning.

On Friday, Jason is ordered to serve 10 days in the school district's alternative education program, housed on Plains Boulevard in a nondescript brown building about a mile north of Tascosa.

There, Jason and two of the other students involved in the altercation spend their weekdays, from 8 a.m. to 3:30 p.m. sitting in the same room, doing their homework or reading the newspaper.

Wrestling coach Johnny Cobb is not pleased to hear that one of the team captains has been kicked out of school for drinking. As punishment, Jason must do 10 "pay-ups," one for every day of alternative education.

A pay-up consists of making the athlete run 400 yards, stopping every five yards to do a push-up. Next, he must bear crawl 100 yards on his hands and feet; do forward rolls for 100 yards; and run 400 yards in less than 75 seconds.

One hundred yards of forward rolls is enough to make Jason want to vomit. His arms and shoulders burn from the push-ups and bear crawls. Ten pay-ups is almost unimaginable.

But each day after school, Jason pays his debt, and he rejoins the wrestling team in seventh period after two weeks.

Sarah Harrison

It's 1:30 a.m. Tuesday, Oct. 19, and Sarah Harrison is still awake. She often studies until 1 or 2 a.m., and tonight she is reading *Hamlet* by William Shakespeare.

A while later, she clicks off the light and sleeps, but she's up again at 5:15 a.m. to study physics for a makeup test that morning. Sarah arrives at school an hour early to take the test, but her teacher isn't there.

Instead of waiting, Sarah decides to drive to her first period assignment at Lamar Elementary School. Three days a week, Sarah spends first period at Lamar, helping Jodi Ingham teach students in the deaf education class.

Sarah chose the Lamar assignment to meet the requirements of her Peer Assistance Leadership class, in which high school students tutor younger kids.

Oct. 19 is a cold, overcast day, and Sarah arrives at Lamar before 8 a.m. Soon, the five students enter Ingham's class and sit in a circle on the floor.

Sarah sits with them as they sing a song and say hello in sign language. They recite the pledge to the American and Texas flags. Sarah signs along with them.

The youngsters are learning to read the calendar, and they tell the teacher the day of the week, the month and the year. Ingham has each student in the circle spell the word "Tuesday" in sign language, but she skips Sarah. One little boy notices that Sarah has not had a turn and insists that she spell the word—with her eyes closed.

Sarah became interested in deaf education because one of her close friends has a mother who is deaf. And she enjoys working with children.

The summer before her senior year, Sarah worked with underprivileged kids at East Park as part of the city's summer program.

She looked after the children at the wading pool, passed out free lunches, helped them play games and checked out sports equipment.

It was a hot, tiring job, but rewarding too, she says.

“Any job I’ve chosen I’ve wanted to work with kids,” Sarah says. “I’ve always loved kids. They’re easier to work with than a lot of people. I have more of a heart for them and more patience.”

Sarah has decided to major in English and education in college so she can become a teacher. She is a gifted English student, though she is equally adept at science and math classes.

She is taking four Advanced Placement classes: physics, calculus, government and English. The classes are weighted, which means they add extra points to her GPA, and she’ll get college credit for the classes if she scores high enough on the end-of-year AP exams.

Until her junior year, Sarah had planned to study pre-med to prepare her for a career as a radiologist. But her plans changed last year when her English teacher, Rebecca Phillips, introduced Sarah to such classics as *The Great Gatsby*, *Moby Dick* and *Catcher in the Rye*.

Sarah loves talking about the ideas she encountered in the books, and she discovered in Rick Devoe’s history class that she also loved writing. She has decided literature will be a part of her future career.

Sarah’s free time is limited, and extracurricular activities provide much of her social life.

Many of her friends are involved in the same activities she is in, and she has grown especially close to a boy named Chris Wright, a junior.

This year they have four classes together. He is tall with dark, curly hair and long sideburns. Sarah describes him as a brilliant student who is “my intelligent conversation of the day.”

Sarah has been waiting, hoping since the beginning of the school year that Chris will take their relationship to a more personal level. They are good friends, and spend a lot of time together. But Sarah wants more.

She holds back expressing her own feelings, however, because she doesn’t believe it is her place to ask a guy on a date.

“I guess I’m old-fashioned,” she says.

Finally, on a Friday night in late October, Chris tells Sarah that he wants to be more than friends. Since then, Sarah says, “we spend even more time together than we used to.”

When Chris leaves town for the Thanksgiving holiday, Sarah misses him terribly. He calls her from Phoenix on Thursday, then returns home on Saturday night.

Sarah goes to see him the next day, relieved that he is back. “It was kind of hard, with him gone,” she says.

Carmen Venegas

Carmen Venegas has thrown herself into her schoolwork with a new sense of purpose.

Now more than halfway through her pregnancy, Carmen is committed to getting her high school diploma so she can get into college and make a good life for her child.

By day, she is immersed in geology, economics, marketing, math and English classes.

Her senior English class is particularly hard, but Carmen loves her teacher, Mary Ross, and makes an effort to be there every day. Otherwise, she has a hard time understanding some of the reading, especially *Macbeth*, by Shakespeare.

“Mrs. Ross explains it really good,” Carmen says. “I can’t miss her class or I’ll be completely lost. I think she’s a really good teacher.”

Carmen makes a “C” in English but maintains a “B” average in her other classes during the first semester. Staying on track at school is particularly important to her.

She knows firsthand the consequences of not doing so. As a sophomore at Tascosa, she was taken before the justice of the peace for trancies.

Each day after school she returns home, where her bedroom has been transformed into a nursery.

Infant products are stacked along the walls, presents bestowed by friends and family at Carmen’s baby shower: a soothing walker and bouncer, a car seat, clothes, a booster seat, baby bath, and various toys and appliances. Carmen likes to take the baby things out and look at them. In her daydreams, she wonders what her baby will look like.

Her dresser bears witness to Carmen’s own childhood. Two tall trophies sit on top, engraved with the year 1987, when Carmen was 5 years old and won a beautiful baby contest and was named the contest’s Dimple Darling.

Near the foot of Carmen’s bed is a baby crib, filled with miniature stuffed animals, pillows, a tiny plush football. Carmen and her family are convinced the baby will be a girl. Her boyfriend, Jacob Gonzalez, who is the baby’s father, says it will be a boy. That’s why he bought the little football.

Jacob, who is 19, works for a roofing company. He was a student at Caprock High School but did not graduate, earning his GED instead.

Until her pregnancy, Carmen and Jacob enjoyed going to dances that featured traditional Spanish music, but Carmen has stopped going for fear of endangering the baby.

Jacob wants Carmen to marry him; she refuses. She says she loves him, but she doesn't want to rush into marriage.

"I'm not ready for that," Carmen says. "I want to see if we can get along after the baby comes. When we get married, I want it to be real nice. I want my family to be there. I want to graduate first, and make sure we can pay the bills, and pay the rent and have what we need."

Finally the day arrives for the sonogram. The nurse moves the sensor over Carmen's belly until she gets a clear picture of the baby inside. Based on the baby's size, the due date is Jan. 2. And the sex of the baby is clear: It's a boy.

Jacob wants a boy so badly that he bursts into tears upon hearing the news. Carmen teases him constantly, saying, "I hope the baby doesn't look like you."

As the pregnancy progresses, Carmen begins to crave banana splits. So she and her 12-year-old sister, Lety, go to Dairy Queen for one each evening. They also walk daily around Memorial Park for exercise.

Carmen finds it increasingly difficult to sleep at night. Her back hurts, and the baby presses on her bladder, forcing her out of bed and into the bathroom several times a night.

Jacob, meanwhile, is a model helper. He does dishes and the laundry as Carmen grows more uncomfortable. He spends most nights at Carmen's house, sleeping in the next room. He and Carmen are excited about the baby, talking to it in the womb and making plans for their future.

As the end of the semester nears, Carmen is forced to stay home from school several times. She is having occasional contractions, more than a month early, and they keep her up all night. When they continue for several hours, she travels to the hospital, but each time the contractions subside.

On the night of Saturday, Dec. 11, the contractions start again, and after two hours Carmen calls the hospital.

The nurses encourage her to drink lots of water and wait until the contractions grow stronger and closer together before coming back to the hospital.

Finally, the pain lessens, and Carmen is able to sleep. In her fitful dozing, Carmen dreams that she has a baby girl and is carrying her upstairs.

Her brother is at the top of the stairs, and as she hands the baby to him, the baby falls. Carmen wakes, relieved it is only a dream.

Up next in the series:

Tuesday: Sarah Harrison and others at Tascosa are in shock after a car crash seriously injures five Tascosa students. Sometimes her love life grows so complicated, Natasha Baker lies awake nights thinking, trying to keep her stories straight.



Pivotal moments

Class of 2000, a five-day serial published by *The Amarillo Globe-News*

Day 3 of 5

Tuesday, June 27, 2000

By SONNY BOHANAN
Special Projects Writer

Carmen Venegas

The contractions begin at 9 p.m. Jan 12.

Carmen Venegas spends the wee hours of the morning moving between her bed and the bathroom. Each time, she walks past the crib filled with tiny stuffed animals and the little football.

Finally, Carmen calls the hospital, and the nurses tell her to wear a pad. If it is soaked within an hour and the contractions continue, she should come to the hospital.

Jacob Gonzalez, the baby's father, normally would have been asleep in the next room, but of all nights he has chosen to sleep at his mother's house.

Carmen wakes her mother, and they arrive at Northwest Texas Hospital about 5 a.m.

She hasn't bothered to call Jacob yet, because of the previous false alarms. When the nurses confirm that her labor has begun for real, she calls him. Within 30 minutes, Jacob and his mother arrive at Carmen's side.

By 7 a.m., several of Carmen's friends arrive to wish her well.

Carmen grows more and more uncomfortable, but she has the help of a massage therapist, family friend Tammy Massey, who stays throughout the labor and delivery.

Shortly after 8 a.m., Carmen's cervix is dilated to 5 centimeters, and a doctor inserts a long needle in her back, injecting anesthetic to relieve the pain. The epidural provides a measure of comfort for her as the contractions increase in intensity, though nothing relieves the terrible pressure as the muscles of the uterus slowly squeeze the baby downward through the birth canal.

By 11:30 a.m., Carmen's cervix is fully dilated, and the baby's head can be seen for the first time as Carmen strains and pushes on the doctor's cue. Carmen's mother, seeing her own child in such pain, slumps down near the door, sobbing.

Carmen spends almost two hours pushing, in such pain that she banishes everyone from the room but Jacob and the massage therapist.

For more than an hour she pushes during each contraction, hunched forward, breathing on the therapist's count, exhausted. The baby's head emerges, but his shoulders are stuck.

Jacob watches the progress in a mirror placed so he and Carmen can watch the baby being born, but Carmen orders him to watch her, to look into her face.

She feels so vulnerable, with her legs in the stirrups. She wants Jacob to look at her face, to see her pain, to help her stay focused.

As the baby is being born, Carmen tells the doctor and the nurses she wants Jacob to cut the umbilical cord. Then the nurse takes the baby boy to clean him up and make sure he is healthy.

It is 12:44 p.m. Thursday, Jan. 13. His name is Isaiah.

Carmen hears the baby crying, but his voice sounds so weak. His cries are short and not loud. Jacob stays by her side, but she says, "Go see your son," and the tears come, streaming down Jacob's face as he walks to the nurse, who places tiny Isaiah Gonzalez into his arms.

Then it's Carmen's turn. After 40 weeks of wondering what the person inside of her will look like, waiting to meet this tiny stranger, Carmen feels almost paralyzed when the nurse puts her baby in her arms. She had thought she would cry. She doesn't. Her insides grow tight. She studies his thick, black hair, his tiny, wrinkled hands, his olive complexion.

You look just like your daddy, she thinks. Throughout her pregnancy, she had teased Jacob, telling him, "I hope he doesn't have your nose." He does. He also has Jacob's hair. He looks like a tiny clone of the man standing next to the hospital bed.

The baby and Carmen have a fever, and the nurse takes Isaiah immediately to the nursery.

Carmen is transferred to her own room about an hour and a half after Isaiah is born. She lies on her back in a new bed, dark circles under her eyes after 30 hours with no sleep.

She places her hands over her stomach, flatter than it has been in months, deflated like a balloon after the 7-pound, 12-ounce Isaiah emerges.

"I never want to have another baby," the 17-year-old girl says, still fearful of the pain she's just endured.

In the nursery, Isaiah lies on his stomach and sucks contentedly on his hand. A little red strawberry marks his right eyelid, a bruise, perhaps, from the battering he took on his way into the outside world.

Still naked, with a tiny clamp on his umbilical cord, Isaiah curls his wrinkly feet into a ball and gazes out the transparent walls of his warming crib. Inches away, his grandmother, Evelyn Mendoza, admires him from the other side of the nursery glass.

"He's hungry," she says. "He's got his whole fist in his mouth."

A nurse lifts the baby and turns him on his back, setting off a shriek from the youngster.

Isaiah has been born with a fever and must be examined by a pediatrician before he can be returned to his mother for his first meal. Back in the room with Carmen, Evelyn urges her daughter to exert her will and convince the nurses to bring the baby to the room so she can nurse him for the first time.

"You just keep calling them until they bring him to the room," Evelyn says.

That night, the doctor tells Carmen that Isaiah will have to stay in the hospital for 72 hours, until Sunday, Jan. 16.

Carmen is scheduled to be released Saturday, but she decides to stay until Sunday, too. She won't be leaving without her baby boy.

Sarah Harrison

Sarah Harrison is in Sunday school Nov. 7 when the news arrives.

Five Tascosa High School students, including two of Sarah's fellow Student Council and National Honor Society officers, were in a serious car wreck the night before at Palo Duro Club.

The teens, Sarah learns from a friend's mother at church, had been at a party inside the gated community south of Amarillo. Their vehicle crashed into a tree.

The driver was Ben Carter, president of the National Honor Society and Student Council speaker of the house. He suffered a head injury and was in the intensive care unit of the hospital.

Jordan Kozar, vice president of the NHS and Student Council chaplain, suffered internal injuries that required emergency surgery to repair his intestines.

Three girls who were passengers in the car also were injured. One of them, a member of the volleyball team, had surgery to repair the bones that had been crushed in her face. The other two also had broken bones.

By Monday, many at Tascosa are in shock. Five bright students, well-liked by kids and teachers alike, had been seriously injured, and a newspaper account of the wreck said police suspected they had been drinking alcohol.

Joel Richardson, Randall County chief deputy, said 30 to 50 high school students attended the party, hours after the Tascosa-Amarillo High football game. Many told police they had been drinking, Richardson said.

"We're trying to find out where the alcohol came from and who provided it, and we'll pursue any appropriate criminal charges from there," Richardson said.

Sarah and other Student Council members visit the injured students in the hospital Monday. They aren't allowed to see Ben, who is still in ICU, and Jordan is barely conscious during their brief visit.

Two days later, Sarah and Chuck Ledwig, the student body president, visit Jordan again at Baptist St. Anthony's hospital. While they are there, Jordan walks down the hallway at a snail's pace, leaning on a wheelchair for support.

As they drive back to school, Sarah and Chuck talk about the wreck. They had not been at the party. They hadn't even known about it because their attitudes about alcohol are well-known among their classmates, Chuck said.

"We don't even get invited," he says. "They know Sarah and I walk the talk."

Chuck is referring to a pledge he and Sarah and more than 100 other Tascosa students made, a written promise to remain free of alcohol, drugs, tobacco and violence.

The pledge is a requirement of their membership in U'n'I Smart & Safe, a voluntary student group that has grown into the largest campus organization at Tascosa. U'n'I is one of several programs at Tascosa designed to steer students away from drugs, alcohol and other destructive behaviors.

Though none of the students in the wreck was a member of U'n'I, Sarah was surprised by the allegations of drinking. The previous year, Ben and Jordan had participated in "Every 15 Minutes," an alcohol-awareness program at Tascosa. Every 15 minutes, the Grim Reaper removed a student from class, denoting the frequency of alcohol-related fatalities nationwide.

One year later, the mock scenario has come true—to the dismay of Jackie Moore, the school's drug-prevention specialist.

Moore oversees the anti-drug and anti-alcohol programs at Tascosa, and the wreck at Palo Duro Club temporarily shakes her confidence in the programs.

"Initially you get very discouraged," Moore says. "But you can't let those kinds of things stop you because you don't know how many other people you are impacting. There are a lot of kids still making good choices."

Ben and Jordan are allowed to remain in Student Council but are stripped of their National Honor Society offices. Sarah is conflicted about their punishment, but in the end she says she believes it was warranted.

"It's real hard, because I love them to death," Sarah says. "I don't want Ben and Jordan to be punished. They've been through a lot. But I think it's fair."

The news is worse three weeks after the wreck, when Ben, the driver, is charged with aggravated assault, a second-degree felony. The charge alleges he was intoxicated at the time of the accident, District Attorney James Farren says.

Three months later, on Feb. 3, Ben pleads no contest to a lesser charge of assault, a Class A misdemeanor. He is sentenced to two years' probation, fined \$2,000 and ordered to submit to a drug and alcohol evaluation, according to court records.

Steven Lee

Steven Lee lives with his grandmother, Betty Deckard, in a large house near Olsen Park Elementary School.

Steven's mother lives in Timbercreek Canyon with her fourth husband. Though he sees his mother often, Steven has lived at his grandparents' home most of his life.

"I'd live with my mom from time to time, but she didn't think it was the most stable environment for me," Steven says. "She said it was better to live with my grandparents."

Until he was in the eighth grade, Steven shared the large upstairs of the house with his grandfather, Don Deckard. They slept on twin beds in the same room for much of the time, and they were the best of friends.

Don Deckard took Steven to Disneyland and Disney World. They went to Las Vegas to see the magicians Siegfried and Roy. The trips always included just the two of them.

“One time we lived in Hawaii for six months, when I was in kindergarten,” Steven said. “He just decided to move. He would just do things on the spur of the moment. He had a Rolls Royce, and he sold it for a pair of ostriches. He bred them and started an ostrich farm.”

Don Deckard owned Deckard Equipment Co., a John Deere dealership, and early every morning he ran three miles. He made sure Steven attended church with him every Sunday.

But in 1994, Don Deckard grew ill. He was diagnosed with cancer, and for the next year he suffered terribly. He died in February 1995, when Steven was in eighth grade. His grandfather’s death changed Steven’s outlook on life.

Steven, who has kept a journal during his senior year in high school, writes his Nov. 8 entry about his grandfather, his girlfriend Lyndi, and his views on religion.

“Tonight, I told Lyndi how I feel. Not once in my life had God revealed himself to me. Not once had he given me reason to believe. Every time, he has failed me.

“The most noticeable example was in eighth grade. For a year, my grandfather had been in and out of hospice and various hospitals due to cancer. It was too bad to operate. After a while, my granddad requested to stay at home with a nurse on call 24/7.

“During his last week, the oxygen level to his brain lessened, resulting in memory loss and slow processing. He couldn’t even talk. Finally, one morning my mom woke me up at 6:30. I knew that I had lost the only father figure I had in my life.

“It hurt then, and it still hurts like hell now. Somehow, I can’t get rid of the pain and I live with it almost every day. Of all people, he did NOT deserve a year of suffering and a struggling death. Saying that God has a plan and that was part of it makes me sick. What kind of divine being separates loved ones like that?

“She (Lyndi) can’t understand why I don’t believe. I explained that I don’t have the feeling. I can’t feel it, so I don’t believe it. When you do something without passion or feeling, it’s pointless. Just a lost cause.”

Three weeks after that journal entry, Steven is at Lyndi’s house, writing his entrance essay for St. John’s College in Santa Fe, N.M.

Feelings of impending loss come over him as he contemplates leaving Lyndi to move away to college.

That night, at home, he pens the following journal entry.

“I’ve never felt this way toward another human being like I do toward Lyndi. After only two months, I’m in love. It’s kind of like a fairy tale, but with a twist of reality.

“Tonight I was typing my essays for St. John’s College on her computer while she was practicing her music for choir. Afterwards, I went into her room and listened.

“While she was sight-reading, I completely broke down. I lost it. It took me five minutes to calm down. She couldn’t imagine the reason why I was crying.”

Unable to tell her what he was feeling, Steven instead wrote Lyndi a note.

“Right now, I’m typing my essays for a college that will take me away from you,” the note said. “It is ironic that you are supporting me in the very same thing that will drive me away. I’m crying because for these last few minutes, I thought of life without you.”

Jason Edwards

The lights blink out and a spotlight cuts through the darkness, swinging wildly around the gymnasium as a hush goes over the crowd.

A dozen hooded figures in black sweat suits sprint to the center and run in a circle around the mat. They drop and perform synchronized push-ups, shouting a letter each time their chests touch the ground: R-E-B-E-L-S.

The Dumas wrestling team watches the spectacle from the north end of the gym. The Demons have traveled to Tascosa this Thursday night, Nov. 18, for the first dual meet of the season.

Tascosa coach Johnny Cobb takes the microphone and introduces the wrestlers by weight, beginning with the 103-pounders. Each one runs to the middle of the mat, quickly shakes hands with his opponent, and sprints back to his teammates for a round of high fives.

Cobb takes special care in introducing seniors Adolf Ortega, a 135-pounder, and Jason Edwards, 171 pounds. Jason is a three-time state qualifier, and Adolf was state runner-up the previous year at 125 pounds.

What the Demons lack in pregame theatrics, they make up for on the mat. By the time Adolf’s match begins, they’ve built a 16-9 lead.

Adolf dominates his opponent, Trey Troutman, then pins him in the second period to bring Tascosa back to within a point, 16-15.

Jason paces nervously, waiting for his match. The meet begins with the lightweights and moves forward to the finale, the heavyweights. At 171 pounds, Jason is near the end of the program and has plenty of time for the butterflies to work on his stomach.

Jason, known as “Eddie” to his buddies, sits with his friends in the bleachers early in the meet. They egg him on, telling him to body slam his opponent, and he promises he will.

As the match draws near, he stretches, skips rope and listens to Metallica on headphones.

As Jason walks onto the mat, Tascosa is losing, 34-15. He quickly takes control of his opponent, Brian Turner, and body slams him on the mat. Squeals of delight issue from the stands, and Jason builds a 7-2 lead in the third period.

Each match consists of three 2-minute periods, with a short break between each one.

A match is stopped when a wrestler is losing by 15 points or has his shoulders pinned to the mat for two seconds.

The wrestlers earn points for taking down an opponent, escaping from a hold, or putting an opponent briefly on his back. The winning wrestler earns points for his team to decide the team competition.

Jason looks at the clock with 22 seconds remaining and goes for the pin, but Turner keeps his shoulders off the mat until the buzzer sounds. Jason wins, 7-2.

He shakes his head, unhappy with his performance, as the referee raises Jason’s hand in victory. He stalks off the mat and sits on the floor behind the team bench, removing his headgear, knee pads and black wrestling shoes.

Few sports can match wrestling for its physical and mental punishment. Miles of roadwork, weight training and daily drills to hone their moves make wrestlers among the best physical specimens in sports. But many a match has been lost by a wrestler in top shape who lacks mental toughness or the will to fight.

Jason, who has been wrestling since he was 4, was disappointed in his own mental preparation for last year’s state tournament. It was his third appearance at state, but his worst performance.

He finished sixth in state as a freshman at 125 pounds, then did well as a sophomore at 135 pounds, but as a junior, at 145 pounds, he fell apart.

“I don’t know why,” he says. “I was in good shape. It was mental.”

This season, he’s determined things will be different.

“I don’t care how the regular season goes—my main goal is to win state,” he says a day before season opens.

The first meet ends on a down note for Tascosa. Dumas dominates with a 52-24 victory, one of the worst losses the Rebels have suffered in the past decade.

Four days later, the Rebels record their first victory of the year, a 72-15 drubbing of Hereford. On the first weekend of December, the team travels to the Rio Rancho duals in Albuquerque, N.M., for their toughest competition thus far.

Jason and Adolf each finish with nine victories and one loss to place the Rebels in a grueling weekend of competition. It is the first loss of the season for both senior wrestlers.

When they return, the Rebels face Boys Ranch in a homecoming match on Dec. 7. Tascosa starts seven freshmen, four sophomores and three seniors. Jason pins his opponent, Jeremy Oatman, in the first period. Adolf, in what turns out to be the final match of his high school career, gets a second-period pin.

But their effort isn't enough. Boys Ranch hands Tascosa a 43-39 loss, winning by a single match.

"I knew in my heart that we'd beat them," Jason says afterward. "Things didn't go the way I thought they would."

The next weekend, Tascosa travels to the Santa Fe (N.M.) Invitational Tournament. The bus idles at Tascosa at 7:30 a.m. Dec. 9 to let the wrestlers climb aboard in the cold morning air. Adolf never shows. Finally, the bus pulls away without him.

Tascosa finishes fifth out of 16 teams.

A week later, Tascosa hosts teams from Liberal, Kan., and Altus, Okla. The Rebels trail 54-6 as Jason's match begins.

Jason is taken down and trails 2-0 before he gets his opponent on his back to go ahead, 3-2.

The Altus wrestler escapes to make it 3-3 at the end of the second period. Jason scores another takedown to make it 5-3, but the Altus wrestler escapes again to close within 5-4. Jason holds on for the 5-4 win, but he is unsatisfied with his performance.

As the referee tries to raise Jason's hand after the victory, Jason walks off, pulling his hand away. The referee cautions Cobb about his wrestler's behavior, and Cobb yells at Jason as the senior sits slumped against the gym wall.

"You better fix that attitude," Cobb says. "When he asks you to do something, you do it, whenever or whatever it is."

Jason looks blankly at Cobb and continues removing his knee pads and shoes, still breathing heavily from the match, his face bright red.

Tascosa loses to Altus, 64-15, the team's worst defeat of the season.

It has been more than a week since Adolf showed for wrestling practice, and he has missed weeks of school.

Cobb and Adolf's school counselor have tried, unsuccessfully, to convince Adolf to return to school.

But he is 18, and school officials cannot force him to attend. At this point, he has missed so much school he will not be able to graduate.

Adolf can't seem to explain why he has lost interest in wrestling and school. He says he has been working to help make ends meet at home.

"It's been pretty tight around here lately," he says. "Christmas is coming up, I've got car troubles and personal stuff I need. I've been trying to make some extra money working at the Civic Center."

Adolf shows up briefly at the Tascosa gym before the Liberal dual begins, just to watch. Assistant coach Kenny Medling tells Adolf to turn in his wrestling gear, hoping that Adolf will say he needs it and intends to return. But Adolf simply agrees to return it. Soon he leaves the gym.

The season has turned into a disappointment for Jason. He is now the lone captain; only one other senior remains on the team. Some of the squad's best wrestlers have failed classes and are not eligible to compete.

And though he has a 16-2 personal record – his two losses are to out-of-state wrestlers – the team losses keep piling up.

He finds himself longing for the baseball season to start again.

"It's aggravating," he says.

"Adolf is gone, and these guys keep failing. They don't seem to care at all."

A win over Palo Duro jump-starts the Rebels, who close out the regular season with a strong third-place finish at a tournament in Liberal, Kan., and a string of four dual-meet victories over Palo Duro, Amarillo High, Borger and Caprock.

Their strong finish gives the Rebels the District 5 round-robin championship. At the beginning of the season, Cobb never would have predicted the title.

"Honestly, no way," Cobb says.

"To win the district round robin with as young a team as we have has been one of the most fun wins I've had since I've been coaching. That includes the times we were picked to win state and did win state."

Jason is wrestling better than ever and enters the district tournament with soaring confidence. The top two wrestlers at the district meet advance to regionals, where the top four finishers qualify for state.

Jason easily wins the district title at 171 pounds, winning his two matches while his mother, Janet Morris, records the action with a video camera. She has dozens of such tapes from years of attending matches.

During the district tournament, Jason places a photograph on the corner of the mat during each of his matches. It is a Polaroid snapshot of him and his dad, Carl Edwards, who is in prison in Plainview.

Jason recently visited his father, only his second visit in almost two years.

He returned with the photo, in which his father is wearing a white prison jump suit. Jason keeps the photo tucked inside his CD case with the music he listens to while warming up.

Jason places the photo on the corner of the mat again during the matches at the regional tournament, Feb. 11 and 12 at the Tascosa Activity Center.

Thirty-six teams from around West Texas fill the arena. The athletes eat, nap, do their homework and wait anxiously for their matches to begin.

Jason's mother works the concession stand, taking a break just long enough to videotape his matches.

He opens the tournament with a 15-3 victory over Reggie Armstrong of El Paso Hanks to advance to the quarterfinals. Just before the match begins, Jason realizes he doesn't have his dad's photo and races to the stands, retrieves it from his CD case and returns to the mat just in time for the match.

He defeats Gerry Moreno of El Paso Bowie in the semifinals. Jason's face is swollen from his two matches the day before, and a dark blood bruise has formed under his right eye.

He appears confident and, unlike some wrestlers, rarely shows any emotion before his matches. His nervousness is evident only through his constant motion.

He cannot remain still, moving around the arena, stopping to talk with friends for a few minutes, but then moving on again, never staying long.

In the semifinal match, Jason tries time and again to take down Jose Torres, but he keeps driving the El Paso wrestler out of bounds. Finally, as time expires in the first period, he manages to keep his toes in bounds and takes Torres to the mat for a 2-0 lead.

Neither wrestler can manage a takedown in the second period, and it ends with the score still 2-0. Jason's mother is so nervous, she can't keep the video camera still because she's shaking so much.

Torres manages to escape in the third period to move within one point, 2-1, and Jason attempts another takedown with 10 seconds remaining. The attempt almost backfires as Torres grabs Jason's leg and drives him down, but Jason manages to grab Torres' leg, too, and he holds on for the final eight seconds to prevent Torres from scoring a two-point takedown. Jason escapes with a 2-1 victory.

"Don't you ever give me a heart attack like that again," Cobb tells him after the match. Jason simply smiles, relieved. He has just advanced to the regional finals, guaranteeing him a trip to the state tournament. The pressure is off now, and he walks to the concession stand to stow his bag until time for the regional final.

"Now that's what I call nervous," says his mother, already back behind the counter.

"I could have held on for another five seconds or so," Jason says.

"You did great," she says.

"Only one more today, and four more in two weeks (at the state tournament)," he says, counting up the matches remaining in the season.

Jason faces Vicente Macias of Fabens in the finals and jumps out to a 2-0 lead with a takedown in the first period. As the second period begins, Jason plants Macias on his back and pins him seconds later.

He jumps up and hugs his opponent and both of his coaches.

Jason Edwards is headed to state.

Natasha Baker

As Christmas nears, Natasha Baker's life has grown busy. She is working late hours at T.J. Maxx, which stays open until 11 p.m. for holiday shoppers. Her workload increases to 32 hours a week, and she often studies until 2 a.m. to keep up with school.

But her heart is somewhat heavy. Tasha recently confronted Paul Antoine Petty, her boyfriend of almost three years, because she suspected he was seeing another girl. She threw a fit, and Petty decided he'd had enough, especially since Tasha had never made a secret of the fact that she had dated other guys during their three years.

"Petty knew I did stuff like that to aggravate him," Tasha says.

Sometimes her love life grows so complicated she stays awake nights thinking, so she can keep her stories straight, she says.

Petty, who lives in Levelland, came to Amarillo over Thanksgiving but did not visit Tasha. An acquaintance told Tasha she saw Petty dancing with another girl. Tasha called him on the phone and went ballistic.

“I just went off cussing and acting crazy,” she said. “After that, he didn’t want to talk to me for a long time. I called him, and he wouldn’t talk to me.”

Tasha tries to take a cheerful view of the breakup.

“I was in a bad mood for, like, three days, but I got over it pretty quick,” Tasha said. “I love him and I want to be with him, but I want to give him time to meet other people. I guess I need time to meet other people. I hope we get back together, but if we don’t, that will be OK.”

She does meet other people, but she still finds herself thinking about Petty.

“I go out with whoever I want to, but sometimes you want someone to talk to that you’ve known a long time,” she says. “We’ve been together so long that it just feels right. I act like I don’t care, but I do.”

At the beginning of December, Tasha has her wisdom teeth removed. Petty, having cooled off for a couple of weeks, calls Tasha on the phone and comes to visit her.

“I told him I was sick and I didn’t feel good and he came down to visit,” Tasha says. During the visit, they make up.

“Petty said, ‘I’ve never cheated on you, and after all the stuff you’ve done to me, you’re going to treat me that way?’

“He knows when I get mad, I don’t think,” Tasha says. “I just go off.”

They make plans to spend time together over the holidays. On New Year’s Eve, Tasha, Petty and some friends go shopping so they can dress up and go out for the night. Tasha buys Petty a pair of shoes and a Tommy Hilfiger shirt. For herself, she buys a red leopard skirt and a red blouse.

As midnight nears, the group drives to an Amarillo Boulevard club. They pull into the parking lot right at midnight, walk into the club and find a melee in progress.

Two women are fighting. One is hitting the other in the face with the point of her high-heeled shoe. Blood is flowing from the woman’s head and face, soiling Petty’s new shirt. Tasha is mad but manages to keep her sense of humor.

“She’s going to remember this whippin’ forever,” Tasha says. “She got whipped right at midnight at the turn of the century.”

Later, Tasha, Petty and several others go to a friend's home. The drinks flow, but Tasha declines.

"I don't drink," she says. "It tastes gross."

Petty tries to convince her to have one drink. "You don't ever do anything wrong," he says. He pours a large cup of E&J Brandy mixed with coke and hands it to her. Tasha tastes it but does not drink it.

"I want to be well aware of everything I'm doing," she says.

Tasha falls asleep about 5 a.m. and the other partygoers go for food. She wakes about 8 a.m. and calls her grandmother.

When Tasha gets home, she washes the blood out of Petty's shirt and sleeps again from about 3 to 8 p.m. On the first day of the year 2000, Tasha and Petty watch the movie *Any Given Sunday*. But she sleeps through most of it.

Up next in the series

Wednesday: Carmen Venegas' trip to Toys R Us turns tragic. Jason Edwards travels to Austin for his final shot at winning a state championship.



Planning the Future

Class of 2000, a five-day serial published by *The Amarillo Globe-News*

Day 4 of 5

Wednesday, June 28, 2000

By SONNY BOHANAN
Special Projects Writer

Carmen Venegas

Carmen Venegas leaves her house a little after 4 p.m. Feb. 15, driving to Toys R Us to get Isaiah, her 1-month-old son, a baby swing.

Carmen's 12-year-old sister Lety and Lety's friend accompany her to the store, with Isaiah strapped into his car seat, secure in the Chevrolet van's middle row.

As she tops the hill on Ninth Avenue near the Amarillo College West campus, Carmen is driving about 45 mph, the posted speed limit. Just then, a blue Ford Fairmont pulls slowly out in front of the van from Quail Creek Drive.

A car driving next to Carmen on the left prevents her from changing lanes, so she swerves to the right, trying to avoid hitting the Ford and simultaneously locking up her brakes in a full skid. It's too late to avoid the collision and the van crushes the Fairmont driver's door.

The van spins around three times and comes to rest in the middle of Ninth Avenue; the Ford skids across the road and stops against the curb. The Ford driver's door is caved in, the frame bent into a curve.

Lety screams, "The baby, the baby!" and Carmen, horrified, whirls to see Isaiah, who is intact in his car seat, shrieking. He cries so violently that his face turns purple, and Carmen tries to extract herself from the wreckage to tend to him.

The front of the van is crushed around her legs, but she doesn't notice whether she's injured, thinks only of getting to Isaiah. Lety and her friend appear to be OK, though Lety's hand is hurting where she tried to brace herself against the impact.

Carmen is trembling and moaning, "My baby, my baby," as she takes him from his car seat and gets out of the van. She sees no obvious injuries and uses her cell phone to call 911, then she calls her mother, Evelyn Mendoza. Carmen is incoherent, and all Evelyn can glean is that a wreck has occurred somewhere near Toys R Us.

"I started praying as soon as I hung up," Evelyn says.

She drives frantically west on Interstate 40 to Soncy Road. She sees a fire truck traveling north, and it leads her to the scene of the wreck.

Firefighters are trying to get the Ford's passenger door open. Carmen is standing nearby, watching. A 72-year-old woman, the driver and lone occupant of the Ford, is covered in blood, trapped and apparently unconscious.

An ambulance arrives, and Carmen and Isaiah are taken inside it to be evaluated by paramedics. As the ambulance prepares to leave, Carmen insists on getting her car seat for Isaiah, so that he'll be secured during their drive to the hospital.

She retrieves Isaiah's car seat from the van, and emergency workers finally free the other driver from her car.

"I looked back, and they put a yellow bag over her," Carmen said. "I didn't want to believe she was dead. I was hoping they were just covering her up because of the blood."

Carmen begins to fear that the police will arrest her for the collision. What are they going to do to me, she wonders.

At the emergency room, medical personnel confirm that the other driver died. Carmen and Lety burst into tears, sick at heart, feeling guilty. Evelyn tries to console her, telling her it wasn't her fault. "There was nothing you could have done," she says.

Judy Baker, a witness who stops at the crash scene, had been driving her car behind the Ford and watched the crash unfold.

"I don't know if she saw the van or not, but she pulled out right in front of it," Baker says. "The van didn't have a chance to miss her—it was that close when she pulled out."

Carmen, Isaiah, Lety and her friend spend five hours in the emergency room. That night, Carmen lights a Sacred Heart candle and says a prayer for the woman and her family. Carmen sleeps little; her neck and back have grown sore. Isaiah cries fitfully, sore also from the violent impact of the collision.

Over the next week, Isaiah grows worse instead of better. Within days he begins throwing up and becomes lethargic, dehydrated because he can't keep food or liquids down.

Feb. 22, one week after the wreck, Isaiah is admitted to Northwest Texas Hospital and placed on intravenous fluids. The nurses have trouble finding a suitable vein because he is so dehydrated, and they shave a portion of the baby's head and place the IV in a vein there.

On the third day in the hospital, doctors discover a problem with Isaiah's intestine. A section of it is badly swollen, perhaps from the trauma of the wreck, and they order emergency surgery to correct it.

After two hours in surgery, Isaiah is recovering, with a two-inch incision alongside his belly button. Finally, on Feb. 27, he is released from the hospital.

Three days later, Isaiah develops a sinus infection that turns into bronchitis. He is sick for weeks, and Carmen, who was scheduled to return to school Feb. 28, continues to stay home and take care of him.

Things have turned sour between Carmen and Jacob Gonzalez, Isaiah's father. The baby's illness has tested their relationship to the breaking point.

When the baby cries, Jacob wants Carmen to take over because he fears he cannot calm Isaiah.

Jacob has secured a job at Red Baron Truck Wash, earning \$7.50 an hour. When he needs a ride to work, Carmen refuses. She has to stay home with the baby, she says.

“We fight about every little thing,” she says. “I can’t be jumping for him (Jacob) when he wants me to. I don’t want to be all lovey right now. I’m really stressed because of everything that’s happened to Isaiah.”

Carmen has other problems as well. She is seeing a counselor every week to help her sort through her guilty feelings about the wreck, but she still has nightmares about it.

And she begins receiving warning letters from Tascosa because she has not returned to school. Finally, in the middle of March, she receives a letter telling her she must appear in justice of the peace court on March 23 because of excessive absences.

Carmen takes Isaiah and her mother to the hearing before Judge Phil Woodall. She has been before Woodall before for her absences, and he is not inclined to give her another chance.

Carmen pleads with him to let her remain in school and graduate late, but Tascosa Assistant Principal Shawn Neeley, who also attends the hearing, tells Carmen she is so far behind it will take her at least another year to graduate.

Neeley encourages Carmen to get her GED and enroll at Amarillo College. The college offers scholarships to unwed mothers, and Neeley says she could finish a year of college during the time it would take her to graduate from high school.

Carmen and her mother argue for another chance, adamant that Carmen wants to earn her high school diploma, but Woodall orders her to withdraw from school and get her GED by July 20.

The next day, Carmen takes Isaiah to Tascosa and says a final goodbye to her friends and her marketing teacher, Amber Gibbs. Her mother meets her at the school office and signs the paperwork for her withdrawal.

Jason Edwards

Jason Edwards boards the Trailway bus at 9:45 a.m. Feb. 24 at Tascosa High School.

He and two other Tascosa wrestlers, sophomore Matt Podsemny (215 pounds) and senior Marcos Castillo (heavyweight), have qualified for the state wrestling tournament in Austin. They’ll ride the bus with the other state-bound wrestlers, boys and girls alike, from Amarillo Independent School District.

The bus rolls from Tascosa to Palo Duro, where six wrestlers and two coaches board, and then to Caprock, where six girls, three boys and two coaches get on. In all, 31 passengers will make the 10-hour trip.

Jason has snacks with him and digs in immediately, eating Pringles potato chips and drinking Gatorade.

Coach Johnny Cobb notices and says, “This is the first time I’ve ever had three wrestlers at state where none of them had to worry about making weight.”

Jason admits he hasn’t weighed in two weeks, since the regional meet.

“You better make weight,” Cobb tells him.

Jason isn’t worried. He has wrestled at 171 all year but has never weighed more than 168.

In previous years, he cut weight for each meet. The day before weigh-in, he would skip dinner, go to the gym, run on the treadmill for 30 minutes and sit in the sauna another half hour. He wouldn’t eat lunch the day of the meet.

This year he had intended to drop to the 160-pound weight class, but he found that he enjoyed eating whatever he wanted.

As the bus moves southeast across the prairie, the coaches and adults spread out across the front half of the bus, while the students take up the back half, crowding together in the seats and aisles, singing, listening to music on their headphones, reading wrestling magazines and books.

By 3 p.m., about 90 percent of the passengers are asleep.

One girl is upside down with her head hanging near the floor and her feet in the air. Another is under the seats. Others are wrapped like pretzels in every position.

Between Fort Worth and Austin, the Caprock and Tascosa boys play cards in the back of the bus, gambling a dollar at a time.

The bus arrives at the La Quinta Inn in downtown Austin at 8:30 p.m.

As accommodations are sorted out, the Tascosa wrestlers and their two coaches bail out of the bus and take off jogging, to work the kinks out of their legs.

They run for 20 minutes and finish up at the Texas Capitol. Jason runs like a madman, bounding up and down the steps of the Capitol until he is winded and sweating, working off the day’s boredom and nervousness.

Cobb finally stops them. “I didn’t mean to run them that hard,” he says.

They eat at a grill near the Capitol and head back to the hotel by about 10 or 10:30 p.m. But the wrestlers have a dilemma. Two beds, three big guys.

Jason is senior captain of the team, so he automatically gets one of the beds. Marcos, the heavyweight, and Matt, the 215-pound sophomore, decide to wrestle for the other one. They thrash around the room until Jason deems that Marcos has won by a point. Matt will sleep on the floor.

Jason decides to go to the Caprock wrestlers' room and play cards.

He returns about 1 a.m. but can't sleep and lies on the bed watching television and keeping Matt awake until 3 a.m.

The next morning, they get on the bus at 7:30 and head to the Austin Convention Center for weigh-in. Afterward, they eat at International House of Pancakes as the overcast skies turn to light rain.

Jason wins his two matches convincingly on Friday, beginning with a 14-1 win over Ted Marley of San Antonio Churchill.

Jason is more intense than he's been all year, following through on every move and driving his opponents hard into the mat. He has shaved his head for the tournament and he is pumped, aggressive.

By winning his first two matches Jason advances to Saturday morning's semifinals.

It is the biggest match of his 14-year wrestling career. If he wins, he finishes first or second in the state. He has never finished higher than sixth, which he did as a freshman at 125 pounds.

"Jason has the match of his life," Cobb says about 10 p.m. as the long day of wrestling ends.

In the semis, Jason will face J.J. Holmes, a two-time state champion, of Arlington High School. Holmes is coached by Henry Harmoney, formerly with the Maverick Club in Amarillo and Jason's own coach for years.

"I think we've got him (Jason) believing he can win," Cobb says. "It doesn't matter whether he can or not, as long as he believes it."

Saturday morning, Jason comes out wrestling well against Holmes. Halfway through the first period, Holmes gets a takedown for a 2-0 lead that holds up until the end of the first period.

Holmes begins the second period in the down position, but Jason lets him up, giving Holmes a point to make it 3-0. Then Holmes quickly takes Jason down again for a 5-0 lead. Jason escapes and takes control to earn two points for a reverse, but he trails 7-2 at the end of the second period.

As the third period begins, Holmes throws Jason to the mat and lets him up, takes him down again and lets him up, takes him down yet again and lets him back up.

Holmes knows he can't pin Jason, but he has discovered a takedown move that works each time, and he uses it simply to build points—Holmes earns two points for every takedown, and Jason gets only one for the escape.

By the end of the match, Jason is angry and humiliated by being taken down at will. When the buzzer sounds, Holmes has a 16-5 victory, running his season record to 41-0.

Disgusted with the loss, Jason shakes hands with Holmes and Harmoney, then leaves the mat and disappears angrily into the crowd.

The next two matches show just how shaken Jason is by his semifinal loss. Though he still has a chance to finish third by wrestling back through the consolation bracket, Jason doesn't get a single takedown in either match. He loses the first one 7-0; he is taken down three times and gives his opponent an easy escape. Jason has beaten better wrestlers throughout the season, but his heart is not in it.

His final match is against Kyle Edwards of Randall to determine fifth and sixth places. Jason loses, 2-1, and it is clear he has simply given up.

In both of his final matches, he refuses to observe the protocol of meeting his opponent in the middle of the mat as the winner's hand is raised.

He shakes his opponent's hand, but walks off the mat before the winner is officially recognized.

Sixth place. To Jason, it's an unsatisfying end to a stellar wrestling career. He doesn't expect ever to wrestle again, in college or elsewhere.

"I didn't want to get third; I wanted to get first," Jason says. After losing in the semifinals, "I didn't really want to be out there."

Jason's mother, who flew to Austin to witness her first state tournament, is just as disappointed as her son is.

"Well, now he can move on to baseball, which is what he really wants to do," she says.

After the tournament, the team loads up in the bus about 10:40 p.m. After stopping for dinner on the way out of town, they will drive all night back to Amarillo.

Jason, Cobb, Marcos Castillo, assistant coach Kenny Medling, Tascosa girls' coach Donna Welch, Palo Duro boys coach Steve Nelson and a couple of others sit together to eat at Bennigan's.

The mood is generally lighthearted, and they are relieved that the considerable pressure of the state tournament is over.

Jason has finished higher than the other two Tascosa wrestlers, but he is still peevisish, unhappy with his performance.

At one point, the conversation turns to Steve Nelson's career as a high school wrestler.

Nelson is a 1982 graduate of Tascosa and his photo hangs in the wrestling room alongside other greats of Rebel wrestling.

Someone asks Nelson if he ever won a state championship.

"No," Nelson says. His best finishes were fifth and sixth at the state tournament, he says.

Jason is surprised. He has supposed Nelson was a former state champion.

"Wow, and you turned out pretty good," Jason says to Nelson. "I guess I didn't do so bad."

Perhaps he glimpses for the first time the possibility that winning a state championship—or failing to win one—might have little bearing on whether he succeeds in life. He seems more cheerful for the rest of the trip.

Sarah Harrison

Sarah Harrison's busy week just got busier. On the morning of Feb. 17 her computer crashes, and she loses an essay for her English IV class.

The assignment was to explore the persona of Satan in various literary works, including "Young Goodman Brown" by Nathaniel Hawthorne and "Paradise Lost" by John Milton.

She rewrites the essay—1,127 words, three pages—though she misses first and second periods to finish in time for fourth period class.

Perhaps the computer glitch wasn't such a bad thing, she thinks. The second version is better than the first, and she turns it in with confidence.

She has, however, run out of time to write three essays due today in her humanities class with Rick Devoe. But Devoe will not reduce her grade for turning in the essays late, if she gets them done by Monday. It is now Thursday, so she'll have the weekend to complete them.

Though busy, the week has been a good one. Sarah celebrates her 18th birthday Feb. 15 and receives a piece of great news as well.

Austin College, a private Presbyterian university in Sherman, notifies her she's been accepted to the school and is a finalist for a President's Scholarship.

Sarah had begun considering the small liberal arts college relatively late in the process. Her dream had been to attend Wellesley, near Boston, or Bellhaven, in Mississippi, a pair of expensive private schools.

But she began having second thoughts about living so far from home. Sarah received preliminary acceptance from Bellhaven in January but decided against applying at Wellesley because of the cost.

“It wasn’t worth the application fee,” she says. “It’s kind of been a dream of mine, but I realized that’s all it was.”

Sarah was won over by Austin College for several reasons, beginning with its persistence in recruiting her.

“They sent me stuff (in the mail) almost every day,” she says. And one of Tascosa’s guidance counselors, Georgia King, strongly encouraged Sarah to consider Austin College.

“I started looking into it and liked it,” she says. “I got my application together over Christmas and sent it in during January.”

The fact that it was a Texas school also weighed in her decision.

“It’s not too far from Amarillo. I used to not care how far it was, but I just realized being out of Texas would be totally different. Being away from home, I might get homesick.”

Austin College also would be closer to her boyfriend, Chris Wright. He is a junior who plans to attend Rice University in Houston after he graduates. Her parents hope she will choose a school that offers a good scholarship and is close to home, Sarah says.

“They want me to be happy, as long as it can be financed,” she says. “They would be happy if I stayed at Amarillo College or WT, but I really don’t want to do that.”

Sarah is excited she’s a finalist for the four-year, full-tuition scholarship. Of the 40 finalists, 10 scholarships will be awarded, each worth about \$15,000 a year.

She visits the school March 4 for her interview. One week later, she learns that she has won the scholarship. Now it’s official: She will attend Austin College.

The good news continues when Sarah’s English teacher, Mary Haraden, returns her essay on the persona of Satan.

Sarah’s essay begins:

Throughout the broad range of literary works, deep in the vast universal library, archetypes are commonly used literary tools

that are helpful in connecting the reader to an idea the author is trying to convey.

In using an archetype, such as the persona of Satan, the audience is empowered by the familiarity with the archetypal antagonist who is usually in some way related to evil.

In Cervantes' *Don Quixote* the readers' recognition of the quest archetype helps them to find humor in the comical rendition of a medieval quest. Likewise, the complex and terribly grave character of Satan, the rebel who led a revolution against Paradise, is developed by Milton.

Sarah made a perfect score—100—and Mrs. Haraden attached a note to the paper with her comments: “It was thrilling to observe in your essay the full intellectual grasp of the concept of archetype. It’s moments like this that a teacher lives for. Thank you!”

Natasha Baker

Senioritis, the disease that plagues high school seniors each year, has infected Natasha Baker.

Everyone is getting on her nerves—teachers, her mother, her grandmother. And when Natasha is unhappy, she isn’t shy about letting people know it.

This week, the object of her wrath is her English teacher, Mary Haraden. The class is reading William Golding’s novel *Lord of the Flies*, and Haraden administers what she calls “crumb” tests every other day.

The test consists of four sentences, each describing an event, or “crumb,” from the chapter. The students are to write everything they can remember about that particular event in a limited amount of time.

On March 6, Tasha is unprepared because she had not done the reading, and she makes a zero.

The grade does not sit well with Tasha, an A-B student who has made B’s in Mrs. Haraden’s class all year.

Later, when Mrs. Haraden steps into the hall to talk to another teacher, Tasha expresses her anger and concludes by saying, “I hate her.”

Mrs. Haraden walks back into class just in time to hear. The teacher calmly explains that students can drop their lowest grade and the zero will not count against Tasha’s average.

On Wednesday, the students take another crumb test on “Lord of the Flies,” and though Tasha has done the reading, she believes she has done poorly again.

Apparently, Tasha is not alone in struggling with the tests. The next day, Tamikka Williams, one of Tasha’s friends, and a student named Elana join with Tasha to complain to Mrs. Haraden.

“Can I suggest something?” Tamikka asks

“You can suggest,” Mrs. Haraden says.

“Rather than asking us questions, can we just write a paper and summarize what we’ve read?”

“We’ll talk about this after your spelling test,” Mrs. Haraden says.

After spelling 10 “P” words—from perturbation and perquisite, to perfidious and peremptory—the girls take up the argument again. But Mrs. Haraden is ready for them.

“The format of this test is designed to make it easy to make 100 if you’ve done a good job of reading,” Mrs. Haraden tells them.

“Even if I read it 12 times, I still wouldn’t get the questions you ask,” Tamikka says.

“I don’t think we should be condemned for not remembering small details that you think are important,” Elana says.

“The quiz is designed to test you on the four most important events of the chapter—not small details,” Mrs. Haraden says.

“It’s a matter of opinion what’s the most important,” Elana says.

“The signal to you is you need to read the chapters more than once,” Mrs. Haraden says.

“I read well above a 12th-grade level, and I’m a fast reader, but it’s not fair to test us on a college-level book,” Elana says.

“Seniors have been succeeding on this book for 25 years,” Mrs. Haraden says, “right here in this classroom. Some people have a higher reading level than others. That’s just a fact. Just like some people are taller than others. Girls, why don’t you try reading the chapter twice?”

Mrs. Haraden moves on to other topics, but Tasha asks, “Can I go in the hallway, because I’m feeling very agitated in here.”

“You’re experiencing perturbation, aren’t you?” Mrs. Haraden says, using one of the class’ vocabulary words. She is unflappable.

“Yes, put your desk out in the hallway.”

Tasha remains in the hall until the end of the period, and continues griping as she walks to her next class.

It is well-known to all Tascosa seniors that Mrs. Haraden is retiring at the end of the school year. She is an institution at the school, and most seniors have encountered her at one time or another for the last 25 years.

And they will never forget her. She is exacting, brooks no silliness and holds students to the same standards that she held their parents.

“I wish she had retired last year so I didn’t have to have her,” Tasha says.

Mrs. Haraden is not surprised to hear that Tasha feels that way.

“I’ve been hearing this for years—from parents and students,” she says. “I’ve had parents ask me, ‘When are you going to retire?’ Usually when their child has failed my class.”

Later, as Tasha walks to her next class, she unwittingly pays Mrs. Haraden the highest compliment a teacher could get.

“At least I’ve learned a lot in there,” Tasha says. “I haven’t learned anything in my other classes.”

Steven Lee

Steven Lee is trying to decide what college to attend, but he’s disappointed by his visit to St. John’s College, an elite liberal arts school in Santa Fe, N.M.

He travels there in mid-January, his first visit to Santa Fe, and is dismayed to find that all the houses and buildings are adobe-style architecture.

He didn’t like the feel of the city or the campus.

“It was a bunch of adobe huts,” he says. “That is so annoying.”

Santa Fe seemed like a small town, he said, and the school felt isolated.

“There’s no current events, so that makes it feel even more isolated from the modern world. Everything there is ancient.”

Steven has grandiose ideas for his future, both in college and beyond. He will travel to D.C., for five days in February for the National Youth Leadership Forum. There, he will take part in a mock international crisis involving North Korea. Each participant will play the role of a government official to learn the ways and means of international diplomacy.

Steven says he hopes to play the American president so he can “nuke” North Korea – just to see how far he can push the mock exercise. Steven also wants to invent a virtual reality theme park, much like the holodeck on the television series “Star Trek: The Next Generation.”

“I’ll be so rich, I’ll make Bill Gates look like a pauper,” he says.

Steven says he will someday own most of Amarillo and plans to be Amarillo school board president so he can overhaul the local educational system. He’d also like to start his own school, which would offer exclusively Advanced Placement classes for top students.

Steven knows that finding the time to reach all his goals will be difficult. He intends to set himself a rigorous schedule in college by declaring a triple major in economics, political science and computer science.

Since St. John’s College offers none of those courses, Steven decides to focus his attention on Texas Tech University and Austin College.

Texas Tech has a fencing team—Steven’s favorite sport—but Austin College does not. As a state school, Tech is also cheaper, and it is required to accept him because Steven is in the top 10 percent of his class.

In the end, Austin College offers Steven an \$8,000-a-year scholarship. He also hears from St. John’s, which offers him \$2,000 a year, a mere dent in the \$32,000 annual cost of attending the Santa Fe school. Steven has until May 1 to accept the Austin College offer, and Texas Tech won’t inform him of any scholarship money until May 31.

Steven decides to attend Austin College.

The series concludes:

Thursday: As graduation nears, Natasha Baker is ready to break away—from school, from home, from Amarillo. Sarah Harrison addresses Tascosa High School’s 431 graduating seniors.



Saying Goodbye

Class of 2000, a five-day serial published by *The Amarillo Globe-News*

Day 5 of 5

Thursday, June 29, 2000

**By SONNY BOHANAN
Special Projects Writer**

Natasha Baker

After four years of eating lunch at the same cafeteria table, Natasha Baker has moved.

The table has been a mainstay in her years at Tascosa, a place to meet with friends and have fun, but that has changed in recent weeks.

A feud has erupted in the group, and Tasha and her best friend, Tamikka Williams, have decamped to a table two rows over. Tasha, the homecoming queen, and Tamikka, Miss Tascosa Belle, are fast running out of friends in the lunchroom.

The undercurrents have been there for a while. One of the boys who dated Tasha for four weeks now deems her “stuck up,” Tasha says. One of Tasha’s friends since middle school tells Tasha she and Tamikka have become stuck up since winning their crowns in the fall.

The showdown began one day as Tasha was leaving the library for lunch. She walked across the commons to the cafeteria, where she found Tamikka pitching a fit, yelling at the other students who sit at the table.

Tamikka had overheard them talking about Tasha, and she lost her temper. Her tirade attracted the attention of everyone in the cafeteria, including the teachers.

“Don’t waste your breath on them, Tamikka,” Tasha said, and they moved to the new table.

That’s the sort of mood Tasha has been in lately. As May begins, she is ready to break away—from school, from home, from Amarillo—and be on her own.

Graduation is Saturday, June 3, and Tasha plans to move to the Dallas area two days later with her boyfriend of three years, Paul Antoine Petty, who lives there.

“I hope I can hold on one more month,” she says.

Tasha has lived with her grandmother, Jean Washington, most of her life, but now they are arguing often. Tasha suspects it is because she intends to move in with Petty. The two teens aren’t married, and that’s the way Tasha wants it—at least for now.

“We’re not talking about marriage,” Tasha says. “I want a platinum ring, and it’s going to take a while for him to buy one. I said, ‘If I’m going to be your wife forever, I want something that will

last forever.’”

After carrying on a long-distance romance, Tasha wants to see whether she and Petty can get along in closer quarters.

She hopes to attend the University of Texas at Arlington. She doesn’t know yet what she will study.

Tasha wants to live in Arlington, but Petty wants to live in north Dallas, near his friends. His job entails taking hotel reservations over the phone. Tasha will have to find a job when she gets there, and she’ll have to buy a car.

“I know I’ll have to pay bills, but I’m ready to have my own stuff, my own area,” she says.

On May 13, Tasha goes to the senior prom with Byron Luckey, a senior at Tascosa. As graduation nears she gives her notice at T.J. Maxx, where she has worked all year. On May 26, her last day at work, the staff buys a giant cookie for her, and she and her friend April go out to a bar afterward.

Seniors get out of school a week before graduation, and Tasha takes the time to relax a bit. On May 30 she spends the day with her grandmother, who is celebrating her 64th birthday. Tasha takes her to get her nails done, and they go shopping for clothes.

The day leaves her sad about moving away from her grandmother. “I’m going to miss her a whole bunch,” Tasha says.

But she’s looking forward to her new life. “I’m so excited,” she says.

Steven Lee

Steven Lee spends a lot of time traveling as his senior year comes to a close.

He visits Austin College for two days and makes a decision: He will not be living in the “party” dormitory.

Steven attends the school’s annual Roo (short for Kangaroo) Camp. He spends two days and a night at the campus in Sherman, taking part in games and activities.

He has a blast at the camp, but the all-night comings and goings in the dorm irritate him.

“I don’t really appreciate being woken up 20 times during the night by people coming home from parties,” he says. “I’m going to stay in a different dorm—the coed dorm, or the all-men’s quiet dorm. I’m going to study more than the average person, with three majors and two minors.”

Steven traveled to New York City in April with the Tascosa choir. His mother and stepfather accompanied the group as chaperones, and the choir performed three concerts during the five-

day trip: at St. Peter's Cathedral, Lincoln Center Plaza and West Point.

The students also visited the Statue of Liberty, attended performances of *Les Miserables* and *Beauty and the Beast* on Broadway, and went to a New York Yankees game, which Steven could have lived without.

"I'm not a baseball fan," he says.

Overall, Steven found New York to be a city best avoided in the future.

"I didn't like it," he says. "You only had two feet of walking space anywhere you went, and the air smelled horrible. The prices were expensive, and everything was jam-packed.

"It was a necessary experience, but I would not live there by any means, unless I was a millionaire. Then I would have everything I needed and not have to worry."

Steven traveled to Kansas City in May for a fencing sectional tournament. He finished in the middle 50 percent of the field. That trip forced him to miss the senior prom, but his girlfriend, Lyndi Williams, went with a group of friends.

Steven and Lyndi have been dating eight months now, and they plan to continue their relationship after Steven goes away to college. They have worked out a plan to see each other every two weeks. Lyndi, who will attend Amarillo College, will drive to Sherman once a month to visit, and Steven will drive to Amarillo on the two week interval in between.

"I'm planning on taking 20 hours next semester," Steven says, hoping he'll have time to adhere to their plan.

As the final grades are announced, Steven learns that he finished with a 95.56 average, three-tenths of a point higher than his average at the beginning of the year. He also moved up one spot in the class ranking, from 27th to 26th, out of 431 graduating seniors.

Steven and Lyndi are nominated for top 10 senior, one of the school's most prestigious awards. The top 10 seniors, along with many other awards and scholarships, will be announced at the annual awards assembly May 9.

At the assembly, Lyndi and Steven win \$400 scholarships from Coca-Cola, but Steven's disappointment grows as the evening advances. The scholarship is his only award of the night, while Lyndi gets several honors, including All-State choir.

Then, as the assembly nears its end, the top 10 seniors are announced. Lyndi is one of the 10, but Steven is not. He is happy for her but jealous at the same time.

He writes his bitter feelings that night in his journal. He realizes his feelings might seem petty, but the words pour out, filling three pages.

These comments seem pessimistic, but my outlook on high school changed this evening at awards night. Lyndi won several awards, including the Coca-Cola scholarship and Top 10. I wished for and expected the latter for myself but came up empty-handed.

I'm proud of Lyndi—all the BS she put up with in school has paid off. . . . It's hard not to be frustrated when recognition doesn't pay you a visit.

Four years of dedication, extracurricular activities, high grades, teacher's respect. Three years of late choir rehearsals, strenuous fencing tournaments, and endless debate tournaments. What do I have to show for it?

Steven lists his disappointments and failures over the next page and a half, then concludes: "Looking back, one could say I was successful in high school, but he could easily argue the opposite. I guess the most important part is that I'm still standing—in a heap of disappointment after this night."

Steven's disappointment fades over the next couple of weeks. In fact, his spirits soar again when he receives a gift from his favorite teacher, Rick "Doc" Devoe, during the last week of school.

His journal entry for May 26 reads:

"Looking back on the THS award night, my reaction was understandable but unnecessary. For every failure, there's a success, it's just harder to see than the failure."

The entry continues:

"Doc gave me something very special yesterday: his personal copy of *The Fencing Master*."

Inside the front cover of the book, Devoe wrote an inscription: "Steven—Please accept my personal copy of *The Fencing Master* as a symbol of, and thank-you for, these quality years! The Buddha says, 'When the student is ready, the teacher will be there.' Keep opening yourself to higher learning; you will encounter a sequence of *Fencing Masters*. You will then find that you've become one yourself."

The inscription is signed "Doc" and dated May 25, 2000.

Steven finishes the journal entry by writing, "The greatest gifts are those that are unrecognized or unnoticed by everyone."

Jason Edwards

Jason Edwards wakes to the sound of the telephone. He answers it and hears his father's voice.

"I'm home," Carl Edwards tells his son.

After more than a year and a half in prison—he was convicted of drunken driving while on probation for possessing marijuana—Carl has been released. Though they corresponded by letter, Jason has seen his father only twice in two years.

Carl missed his son's senior season of wrestling, but now he can watch Jason play baseball and attend his graduation.

As they talk on the phone, Jason mentions he has a game that afternoon, April 18, against Amarillo High, and he invites his father to watch.

Jason, who usually plays first base, pitches instead, and the Rebels edge the Sandies, 7-6.

It is the first of four games that Carl attends as Tascosa finishes the season with a playoff berth.

In the bi-district round, Tascosa defeats Midland Lee, 5-1, in the first of a three-game series. But Lee wins games two and three to end the Rebel's season and Jason's high school sports career.

After successful seasons in wrestling and baseball, the accolades begin to roll in for Jason.

He is one of five Amarillo ISD baseball players nominated for the Randy Keller Fighting Heart Scholarship, named for a former Tascosa baseball player who died in a traffic accident Dec. 11, 1992.

The \$5,000 award has been given annually since 1993 to an AISD senior baseball player who displays a fighting determination in his life and a passion for the game of baseball.

Jason is humbled when he learns a few days later that he has won the scholarship.

“Guys like (Amarillo High's) Ryan Stevens were up for it, and he is a National Merit Scholar,” says Jason, who finishes school with a 92.36 GPA and is ranked 60th out of 431 seniors.

Carl Edwards attends the May 9 awards ceremony in which Jason receives the Keller award. Tim McLemore, the first recipient of the scholarship, presents the award and reads from a nomination letter written by Jason's baseball coach, Kent Meador:

“His approach to the game could be best described as hard-nosed. He is the guy that needs his uniform washed a couple times after each game in order to get out the dirt and grass stains. He is the type player that sprints to first base after drawing a base on balls, where most other players casually stroll to the bag. He sprints as if to say, You had better be ready because I am going to make something happen, and that is exactly what he does.”

Jason also is recognized at the annual wrestling banquet with three awards.

He is named wrestler of the year, is recognized for having the highest GPA on the wrestling team and for pinning more opponents than any other Rebel wrestler.

During the banquet, Jason reads to the crowd of 150 a speech he has prepared about Carrie Slechta, the Tascosa volleyball coach.

Slechta was Jason's health teacher when he was a freshman, and Jason served as an aide in her class when he was a junior and a senior. They became close friends during that time.

Jason begins the speech by describing a "very special person" in his life, and Slechta, listening in the audience, think he is talking about his mother. She is stunned to realize, halfway through, that Jason is referring to her.

These past two years, she has been probably my best friend, especially this year. She's come to watch most of our wrestling matches, tournaments and most every baseball game. And I love to watch volleyball, which she coaches.

I tried to come watch every game, and this year I saw all but one playoff game and went to the state tournament to watch. They didn't play very well, but it was a great time, and when she said she was going to watch me at my state tournament, it kind of hit me in the gut, and I didn't know what to say. I didn't expect anybody to go except my mom, much less a teacher at school.

Unfortunately, she was unable to make the trip. I do want to say I'm sorry because I made a promise I didn't keep—that I would win a state championship before I graduate high school.

This lady probably knows everything that has gone on with me in the past few years, and she has always supported me in my decisions. I feel that I could tell this lady everything, and I think I have. . . .

Coach Slechta, I just want to say thank you for always being there to talk to and for everything you have done for me these past four years. I couldn't have met a nicer teacher or a better person than you. Thank you.

Slechta is surprised and moved by the depth of Jason's feelings, and by the fact that he reveals them before the crowd.

She remains dry-eyed during the banquet, but the tears begin to fall as soon as she is alone in the parking lot. She cries all the way home.

Carmen Venegas

In the weeks before her classmates will graduate, Carmen Venegas is looking for a job. She is also studying for her GED and taking care of her baby. She no longer considers Jacob her boyfriend.

She puts in an application at most of the retail outlets in Amarillo, but she really hopes to work at IBP, where she can make more money. Carmen has a friend who works in the beef-packing

department and makes \$427 a week.

She doesn't know what day-care arrangements she will make when she finds a job. The prospect of leaving Isaiah for 40 hours a week worries her terribly.

"I'll be wondering if he's crying," she says. "What if they get mad and aren't patient with him? Because nobody is going to treat your kids the way that you do."

Before she can get a job, Carmen must earn a GED to satisfy the court order that forced her to withdraw from school. On May 23, one week after her 18th birthday, she takes the test and feels confident she has passed.

"It was easy," she says. "It's like the 10th grade TAAS test."

She puts in her application at IBP and is told to report to work the following week. She will work in a refrigerated area, wrapping the beef, boxing it and sending it off. She'll have to dress warmly to endure the cold.

Carmen is scheduled to begin her job the same week that her former classmates will graduate. It makes her sad to think about it, but she knows her own childhood has ended, and she's determined to make a good future for Isaiah and herself.

"I miss school so much," she says. "I'm not ready to start working yet, but I have to. It's going to get a lot harder, but I can do it."

Carmen never works a shift at IBP. She and her mother, after several long discussions, decide Carmen should spend the summer caring for her baby, who is teething and not sleeping well.

In the fall, Carmen will enroll at Amarillo College, which is just down the street from her house. She wants to study something in the medical field.

Carmen is happy with her decision.

"I can't leave him with anybody," she said. "He cries, and he's just too attached to me. That would have been eight hours a day, being away from my little boy."

On what would have been her high school graduation day, Carmen learns she has passed the GED. She decides to go see her classmates graduate.

"It still hurt," she said. "I cried. It made me feel real bad."

Carmen's devotion to her son is strong. Some of her friends who have babies go out a lot, leaving their children with their mothers. Carmen disapproves and has no trouble turning down their invitations to go with them.

"I have more fun staying home with him," she said.

When Carmen needs to get out of the house, her mom, brother and sister watch Isaiah for her. She's been going to the Town Club to work out and try to lose her baby weight, and Isaiah is about to start swimming lessons there.

Sarah Harrison

The public address system crackles to life on the afternoon of Monday, May 1, as Sarah Harrison sits in calculus class.

Principal Bob Daniel's voice comes over the speaker to announce the valedictorian and salutatorian for Tascosa's Class of 2000.

He pronounces Sarah the salutatorian, with a 99.586 average, and Kemper Cowden as valedictorian, with a 100.214 average.

"Look, we have both of them in our class," a fellow-student observes, and all eyes turn to Sarah and Kemper. Another student in the room, Chuck Ledwig, has the third-highest GPA.

Though Sarah had hoped for the valedictorian honor, she congratulates Kemper.

Sarah's mother, Kim Harrison, said her daughter's first reaction was alarm at the thought of giving a speech at the graduation ceremony, set for the morning of June 3, a Saturday.

Sarah said the speech is no big deal.

"I'm not really nervous, I'd just rather not do it," she says later. "It's just something I don't enjoy."

May turns into a month of abundant recognition for Sarah. At the annual senior awards banquet, Sarah garners 10 awards and scholarships.

Her busy night begins with an award for being among the top 2 percent of the graduating class. She then wins the Amarillo West Rotary Vocational Scholarship and the Jane Williams Memorial Scholarship. She is recognized for being a Superintendent Scholar for all eight semesters at Tascosa, an honor that requires the student to earn a 95 or higher average in all core classes. She and Kemper Cowden were two of only four Rebels who managed the feat for four years.

Next she wins a scholarship from the school's U'n'I Smart and Safe anti-drug, anti-violence program, and she's recognized for her contributions to the Tascosa Focus program.

Sarah is named outstanding English student and Top 10 Senior. She wins outstanding senior girl, chosen by faculty vote, then is recognized as salutatorian for her near-perfect GPA.

When the two-hour awards ceremony ends, Sarah has picked up \$1,300 in scholarships in addition to her four-year, full-ride scholarship at Austin College. Her arms are full of certificates,

plaques and hardware as she leaves the auditorium.

As the last day of school approaches, Sarah has mixed feelings about the end of her high school career. The seniors finish a week before the lower grades, but Sarah continues to go to Lamar Elementary School to help with the deaf education class. She also visits Tascosa to see Maureen Geiger, the student council faculty adviser, and to have her speech approved by the principal.

On graduation morning, Sarah appears nervous as she waits in the tunnel at the Amarillo Civic Center Cal Farley Coliseum. By 10 a.m. the 5,000 arena seats are nearly full of proud parents, grandparents, sisters, brothers, friends.

At 10:30 a.m., Sarah and Kemper and the other students who will sit on the stage make their way to the coliseum floor.

Kemper and Sarah are easy to spot in the crowd with their red robes and mortar boards, which denote their positions as valedictorian and salutatorian. The others wear black.

They march slowly to the stage, and Sarah walks up the stairs on the left-hand side, taking her place next to Superintendent Bob Moore.

Check Ledwig is on stage, too, along with other students who will take their turns speaking to the class of graduating seniors.

After being introduced by Mr. Daniel, Sarah steps to the microphone.

I'm happy we're all here this morning, finally celebrating 12 years of academic achievement. To say that we're here, that we closed this chapter, evokes relief, satisfaction and even a small sense of sadness within me.

. . . It's my sincere prayer that each of us will continue to make the world our classroom, to become eternal students of the world.

. . . I've learned so much with every experience. I've learned to work with and consider others. I've found that teachers can be friends and that classmates can be teachers. Tascosa will always excite positive memories in me because in the process of expanding my mind with facts and ideas, I've learned equally valuable lessons in life. I've learned what matters, and I've learned what is arbitrary. I've learned perspective.

. . . I wish you well, Class of 2000, and may God bless you in all your endeavors.

She is followed by Kemper, who delivers a light-hearted valedictorian speech while simultaneously recording the graduates before him with a video camera.

He encourages the audience and the graduates themselves to take part in a "Wave," and a section

of the crowd stands and raises its arms, creating a ripple effect as the wave travels through the arena in a circle.

The wave circles the coliseum twice before the graduates finish it off, beginning with those seats in the back and carrying forward, all the way onto the stage. Kemper, pleased with the overall effect, continues his speech.

“I’m going to say a few words which nobody will remember, but in 10 years you’ll remember doing the wave at graduation,” he says.

A half-hour later, 431 new graduates walk out into’ a world washed clean that morning by a spring rain shower. The clouds have parted, and the sun is beginning to shine on the Class of 2000.

The End