



baker MAE aherne

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That laugh was unmistakable. Her smile always lit up the room. The love she poured out to those around her never went unnoticed. **Mae Aherne**, 12, had the unique ability to make the sun shine a little brighter.

"She loved life, she loved being in the mix, she loved dancing, and music," her caretaker and close friend, **Duster Burnett**, said. "She was just a ball of energy and she kept my sunny side up."

On September 29, the world became a little less bright. Mae passed away due to an accident.

Aherne and Burnett were placed together by chance. When Burnett was hired as Aherne's caretaker in 2016, she intended on being there only for after-school hours, but fate chose otherwise.

"The first day I met Mae, she jumped off that bus and I knew it was more than after school. We were joined at the hip, and I knew that we were gonna have a special relationship from that day on," Burnett said. "I always say it was divine intervention when Mae and I were put together. I thank the good Lord above for her."

From then on, their lives were intertwined.

"Mae and I were on the go. We went everywhere and did everything. I didn't not do something when I had Mae because I had Mae, I just threw her in the bunch," Burnett said.

Aherne lived with an intellectual disability, but Burnett did not let that stop her. Together, they went through life spreading awareness and experiencing life limitlessly, embracing everyone's differences.

"People stare and say things because they don't know," Burnett said. "A lot of people say ignorance is bliss. Well, I always tell my kids, and kids I've been involved with to use your intelligence over ignorance."

As the years passed, Aherne and Burnett's families became extraordinarily close. Burnett's granddaughter, **Berklie Duffy**, 12, quickly became a part of Aherne's life.

"She was always around. We literally considered her family," Duffy said. "She was always so happy. She was always smiling. Everyone who met her literally fell in love with her. She was the type of person you would always remember."

Aherne loved learning new things and meeting new people. Therefore, it was in school where she excelled. Exceptional education teacher **Abby Zwetzig** met Aherne at the start of the 2021-22 school year. While they only knew each other in the last few months of Aherne's life, Aherne's attitude and confidence will forever remain with Zwetzig.

"She taught me that there is joy in everything and no matter what you can find a positive. To just keep smiling and keep being you; there is always sun on a cloudy day and to keep pushing through," Zwetzig said. "She was resilient; she taught me how to be even more resilient."

Aherne is remembered for her empathy and care for others. She observed the small details often overlooked by

others and went out of her way to make people feel loved.

"Every morning she [would] get off the bus and she came to my classroom and you could hear her all the way down at the end of the hall, like fifty feet away, yelling 'Ms. Abby, Ms. Abby, Ms. Abby!' just so excited to see me," Zwetzig said. "I think that's what I miss the most out of all of that is just, every morning I made her day just seeing me. She was always so concerned about what I was doing, where I was going, because she showed people how to care so much."

Aherne's sweet nature did not obscure her ability to stand up to others. Whether it was classmates or strangers, she didn't let anyone make her feel belittled, illuminating those along the way.

"We were getting ready to get braces because her two teeth were bucked, and she couldn't close her mouth and so the dentist had said once we got the teeth pulled back she would be able to chew better and even talk better," Burnett said. "One day this little girl goes 'Why do you look like that?' and Mae goes 'Need braces,

need braces,' and I said, see, there it is. She needs braces. End of discussion, she didn't ask anything else. Mae wasn't going to let them make fun."

Throughout Mae's life and after her passing, Burnett continues to help reinforce the importance of a positive attitude in all aspects of life.

"I've always been [positive] my whole life. I refuse to let negativity take over. It's amazing how a little bit of positivity can go a long way," Burnett said. "With Mae I would say 'What's the word?' 'Sunny side up, sunny side up.' She learned sunny side up real quick. A lot of the relatives I had met at the service they were like, 'Wow that sums it up; sunny side up.'"

Aherne's impact reached far and wide. Her presence will never be forgotten and through her spirit of eternal sunshine she will continue to teach and inspire.

"Last year, I bought these, they're called Wild Mountain Hibiscus. There were three different bushes, so I gave her one, I said 'Mae you can plant this anywhere and I'll plant the other two,'" Burnett said. "So I had a little spoon and she dug out the dirt and she put those flowers there. Well, last year they didn't bloom, because the weather's been so crazy, things have been blooming when they're not supposed to be blooming. Well, Mae's accident happened September 24, and Mae gained her wings on September 29, and that day these three flowers bloomed. And I was like 'Mae! Look at that' and I could see her now, 'Flowers so pretty, flowers so pretty' she repeated everything three times. Now she's looking after all of us after all of us looked after her."

Story by Allie Frizzell
Designer Katie Brown

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memories from FRIENDS

Friends of Mae share what made her special and their relationship

ALEXIS GLOVER, FACULTY: "Mae was always happy, she would come in and was always very excited and would always 'say hey Coach Glover' and she would take another lap and then say, 'Hey Coach Glover' everytime she went around. She was one of those super sweet kids that would never hurt a fly and never speak ill to anybody. Mae was an excitable person and was always just happy." Glover said; photo by a. zwetzig



CAROLINE SCHEFFER, 11: "I met Mae when I was in 7th grade. Her kind soul not only brought a smile to many people's faces but was a light in everyone's life. She was loved by all the people that surrounded her daily and taught many how to love and the special needs community in a different light. I remember watching Mae listen to her caregiver very closely to direction and was so patient even though it was hard for her. Her patience taught me to be more patient." Scheffer said, photo by d. burnett.



photos courtesy of d. burnett