



Staten Island Advance

Wednesday, February 15, 2012

Poignant goodnight to student prince

Wagner College conducts memorial for hit-run victim

Tillman, recalled as a beacon of compassion

BY COURTNEY DUNN

STATEN ISLAND — When Ronald (R.J.) Tillman came home from volunteering at the Eger Healthcare and Rehabilitation Center not long ago, close friend and former nursing student Eric Gerber recalls, he couldn't contain his enthusiasm for spending time with the residents, and he worried they wouldn't have anyone to talk to once his shift ended.

He logged into Facebook and sent a simple message to Gerber: "Patients are my love."

That's the memory students in Wagner College's nursing program held fast to yesterday during a memorial service for the 29-year-old student — they celebrated his overall goodness, compassion and understanding.

Tillman died Sunday night after a hit-and-run driver plowed into his bicycle on a curved stretch of Howard Avenue, as he pedaled home in the direction of Westerleigh after a night spent studying in the college library. As of early today, police had yet to find the driver.

Nearly 50 of Tillman's loved ones, including friends, faculty and family, filled a lecture hall to remember his accomplishments and honor his life. While slips of paper were passed around for the writing of condolences to his family, students said they were dreading the sight of Tillman's empty seat in the classroom.

After the Rev. James Smith, newly appointed campus chaplain, welcomed everyone, Dr. Roger Wesby and the Wagner College chorus dedicated their rendition of "Deep River" to Tillman, prompting tears from friends and family.

Dr. Richard Guarasci, the president of Wagner College, spoke of the example Tillman set for his contemporaries and gave advice on how to cope with this sudden loss. He suggested that nursing students think of Tillman when they are with their patients. "As much as you want to block out the moon and the sun, remember what he was to us," said Dr. Guarasci.

The president announced the creation of a scholarship in Tillman's name, and he said he'll be meeting with the city Department of Transportation this week to explore ways to make the road safer for students.

"R.J.'s Song" eloquently summed up Tillman's character, describing him as "a light that cannot be dulled."

Students fondly reminisced about his contagious smile, recalling that it never faltered, "even when he was an hour late for an exam."

The memorial closed with "Amazing Grace," after which everyone had the opportunity to place a white carnation on a table before exiting in silence.

"It was one of the most beautiful tributes I have ever seen," said the Rev. Anthony J. DeLuca, assistant chaplain. "It was so sincere, he was universally well-liked."

The driver, he said, displayed "a brutal disregard for human life."

The Rev. James Smith said that although such a tragic incident has the potential to hurt a college community, Tillman's brief yet remarkable presence at Wagner helped to forge bonds that will never be broken.