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Sem Yeto student dies, school community mourns



Mike McCoy/Daily Republic

BY SUSAN WINLOW
DAILY REPUBLIC

FAIRFIELD — Stephania Terry graduated from Sem Yeto High School on Thursday night.

As the class president, she gave a speech on hard times and looking toward the future.

"One of my hard times over the past years was my mom passing away," she said in her graduation speech. "But it made me stronger and wanting to graduate because I know she wanted me to. And look, I

**'We can face the challenges and obstacles that lie ahead.
This isn't the end; this is just the beginning.'**

— Stephania Terry's Sem Yeto High School graduation speech, June 7, 2007

did it."

"She accomplished what she wanted to do," Paul Terry said of his daughter. "I told her (at her graduation) her mom was looking down on her right now."

Less than 24 hours later, Step-

nia Terry, 17, died.

While an autopsy is still pending, foul play is not suspected — neither are drugs or alcohol, said Deputy Adrian Garcia of the Solano County Coroner's Office. More likely the culprit could be the sleep apnea or

the epileptic seizures from which she suffered.

Stephania Terry's mother, who also suffered from seizures, died two years ago, but not before instilling a desire within her daughter to finish high school. And Stephania Terry didn't die until she fulfilled that dream.

Sem Yeto principal Dick Chadwick said she told him on graduation night that she wished her mom was there.

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Stephania Terry speaks at Sem Yeto High School graduation ceremony Thursday evening.

Dies: Devastating news

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"She got to do the things she wanted to do for her mom," Chadwick said.

Stephania Terry, who was described as giggly, poised, polished and reliable, spent the days before and after graduation much like other students. On June 5, two days before she graduated, she spent time with her friend, Kristi Zieska. They decorated their caps and gowns with glittered stenciled designs - stars and words such as "dream" and "success."

After the graduation ceremony, she spent the night at Zieska's house. Like most teenagers, the two girls and another friend talked long into the night. Stephania Terry left Zieska's house at 7:30 a.m. Friday.

It's the last time Zieska saw her friend alive.

Her death cut a swath of devastation through her friends and family. It was also felt among Sem Yeto and Fairfield-Suisun Unified School District administrators, who knew Stephania Terry from her extensive involvement in groups such as the Inter City Student Association and her almost-monthly speeches at school board meetings, where she kept the board updated about Sem Yeto.

"I'm going to remember Stephania for her buoyant personality (and) never-say-quit attitude," said Superintendent Woodrow Carter. "She was a

leader. All of us are absolutely heartbroken."

So are her friends and family - Stephania Terry also had two older half-siblings, but it was just she and her father living at home when she died.

"She brought so much joy to my life," Paul Terry said. "Her smile, her laughter - She used to call me 'daddy.'"

A memorial service was held Monday at Sem Yeto, and an area Chadwick called "Stephania's corner" was established with perennials such as Japanese iris and red ornamental grass. A ceramic tile plaque will hopefully be laid in the fall, Chadwick said.

"She will always be a part of that school with the living plants out front," Paul Terry said.

The school is also planning to set up a memorial scholarship through Assist-a-grad. Chadwick said it will be for a Sem Yeto graduate who wants to go into some type of training beyond high school.

A memorial fund has been established at Solano First Federal Credit Union - account number 52097-02 - for those who would like to help with funeral expenses.

"I'll truly miss her," Paul Terry said. "I'm not going to say 'good-bye,' but 'I'll see you later.'"

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