NEWS

With cop’s help, Como Park senior who tried to end life is back on football field

Como park linebacker Ali Bility runs to the sideline after Como Park makes a defensive stand against Breck School at McKnight Stadium at Breck School in Golden Valley on Tuesday, Oct. 15, 2016.(Pioneer Press: John Autey)

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On a winter day in St. Paul, Ali Bility didn’t think he could live anymore.

The 17-year-old and his mother had been getting into arguments, plus he was struggling in school. He loved playing football, but wasn’t on track academically to be eligible for the team his senior year.
Bility attempted suicide and spent weeks in treatment for depression. He returned to Como Park Senior High School and started to find hope.

St. Paul police officer Toy Vixayvong was the new school resource officer at Como Park and he’d heard what Bility was going through. He began pulling Bility out of gym class to weight train with him. The two went out for pizza or Chinese food. Mostly, they talked.

The connection between the student and the officer helped pull Bility through. Como Park Principal Theresa Neal said she’s seen Vixayvong’s passion for connecting with students since he arrived at the school in January, though he and Bility seem to have a special bond.

Bility wanted to play football more than anything, but he needed to focus on his academics to get there. Vixayvong worked with Bility to establish his goals and, through hard work, Bility accomplished them. He chose to attend summer school, got caught up in school and was able to play football again this school year.

On Tuesday night, the middle linebacker was in the starting lineup at Como Park’s sectional game against Breck School in Golden Valley. Como Park won 39-17, advancing to a section semifinal game against St. Croix Lutheran at 7 p.m. Saturday in West St. Paul.
“I think Ali, like many other young people who are on this journey of growing into adulthood, will encounter situations in their lives that I see sometimes as speed bumps,” Neal said. “It rocks their world in many ways and then how do they recover from that? For Ali, I admire his resiliency, character and integrity and ability to recover.”

GETTING HELP

Bility, who grew up in St. Paul and attended Como Park all through high school, felt hopeless in February.

“It was a lot of stuff on my plate at the moment,” he said. “Just minor stuff and major stuff all combined.”

After he attempted to kill himself at home, Bility received in-patient and then out-patient mental health treatment for about a month before he returned to Como Park High School.

Vixayvong, a St. Paul police officer for 16 years, sought Bility out when he was back in school.
“When I met Ali, he couldn’t look further ahead,” Vixayvong said. “He was just living for today, struggling through today, didn’t have any plans in the future at all and then we started talking about – ‘What’s your short-term goal?’ ”

For Bility, that goal was getting his academics back on track, so he could continue playing football his senior year.

Bility said he’s always had friends, though he never wanted to bother them with his problems, but he could open up with Vixayvong. Among other things, they have a love of football in common — Vixayvong was a running back when he was on the Richfield High School football team and his 16-year-old son plays football now.

BACK TO THE GRIDIRON

In August, Bility heard the good news: he was on schedule to graduate in 2017 and would be eligible to play football.

The season hasn’t gone as well as Bility had hoped — the Cougars finished the regular season with a 2-6 record, giving them the fifth seed in the Class 3A, Section 4 playoffs. But Bility is happy to be playing and spending time with his teammates.

Bility has been a good player, said Kirby Scull, Como Park’s head football coach. He’s a middle linebacker and the Como defense’s third leading tackler. Entering Tuesday’s game against Breck, Bility had 32 solo tackles, 22 assisted tackles and two fumble recoveries despite missing two games with an ankle injury.

“He has a lot of energy,” Scull said. “He’s very passionate about the things that he does.”

‘THINGS ARE GOING GOOD’

On Tuesday, Bility thought about his life now.

“Things are going good,” he said.

He’s planning his future: retaking his ACTs, finding a job for the rest of his senior year, maybe joining the National Guard, and definitely graduating from Como Park and going to college. He would love to attend the University of Minnesota and study to become a registered nurse.
“The principal and I were just talking about how proud we are of Ali,” Vixayvong said. “He’s put in his time, put in his work and has been able to achieve his short-term goal. He talks a lot about succeeding in life and so far he’s on the right track.”

Como Park Cougars linebacker Ali Bility joins his teammates in welcoming their head coach Kirby Scull into a huddle after the Cougars beat Breck School, 39-17, at McKnight Stadium at Breck in Golden Valley on Tuesday, Oct. 25, 2016. (Pioneer Press: John Autey)

HOW TO GET HELP

Tips from Suicide Awareness Voices of Education (SAVE):

- If you become aware that someone is in immediate danger of hurting him or herself, call 911.
- If you hear someone is talking or posting about self harm, reach out to your friend — call, send a message or stop by. Ask him or her what’s going on.
- Say to your friend: “I’m here for you. I’ll help you get the help you need. The pain you’re feeling will go away.”
- The key message to convey is, “There is treatment out there. We know it works and it’s effective,” according to Dan Reidenberg, executive director of SAVE.
- National Suicide Prevention Lifeline is at 800-273-8255

Tags: High school football, St. Paul