Dear Editor,

It is with a tremendously heavy heart that I write back to my hometown newspaper today. It has been a dark, painful week for so many associated with Wauneta-Palisade, as well as other communities who experienced tragic losses.

Some of our recent W-P grads and current students went to bed last Tuesday evening, their eyes still wet with fresh tears from the tragic loss of young Rhiannon Peak of Paxton. Many members of the W-P community knew Miss Peak well, and were heartbroken to hear of the motorcycle accident that took her life. Parents struggled to find the right words to comfort their young sons and daughters, many of whom no longer live at home. While Tuesday night's counseling sessions proved difficult, no one was prepared for the following morning's shocking news.

One of our own had been in an accident. Cody Fanning, a beloved member of our W-P community, had fallen from the back of a pickup truck onto a street in the southeast Nebraska town of Crete, where he was a football star at Doane College. His night of celebrating a successful junior year at college had ended abruptly and tragically. Friends and family rushed to his side in a Lincoln hospital, praying for a rally only Cody could have pulled off. Alas, Cody died in that hospital, surrounded by loved ones who grappled with the loss of their son, grandson, brother, nephew, boyfriend, friend, teammate and mentor. They will continue to grieve as the rest of us prop them up in prayer and attempt the seemingly impossible task of providing the comfort and peace they so desperately need.

I don't know whether I'm qualified to write a tribute for Cody, because I was merely a casual observer of his senior year of high school while I was employed at The Breeze. I know there are countless others who could provide the insight necessary to describe his personality. It was what I noticed in Cody's character, though, that has inspired this letter. It is the loss of a person of such character that has cast a pall over so many of us this week, whether we still reside in the area or have moved away.

Cody was walking proof that big things come in small packages. A lion-hearted young man of just 5'6", 155 pounds, Cody wasn't a typical athlete. In fact, Cody was atypical in every sense of the word. I watched him in football, wrestling and track during his senior year of high school and

he excelled in all three. Some of his success was due to the athleticism and resilience he inherited from his parents, no doubt. A great deal more, however, came in the form of pure grit. Cody willed himself, through hard work and dedication, to 'max out' every time he competed. With that sense of urgency, intensity and determination was an understated air of cool calm, a rare dichotomy. He was a leader who avoided bombast; Cody led by example. After Cody had competed to the absolute best of his ability, he went right back to work at getting even better.

I enjoyed watching his tenacious spirit in action, as did his many fans in the crowd. He was an inspiration on the field, mat and track; and he was a polite and well-rounded young man outside of the sports realm. I enjoyed reading Doane College recaps that included his name, as well as seeing pictures his mother posted on Facebook. The hilarious and touching memories posted on social networks from his high school and college friends, teachers, and coaches have also brought to light a wild, fearless, extremely goofy side—which I certainly appreciate. He was, and will remain, a great source of pride for his family, which includes the W-P and Doane communities.

His death serves as a harrowing reminder of the other young deaths our community has experienced in the past several years, some of which involved members of his own family. It's often said that when an older person dies, we grieve for the past; but when a young person dies, we grieve for the future. We think of all that he could have become, considering his success in life thus far. With Cody, however, I think many will grieve for both. That's how well he lived his years. We struggle to find the words to describe the vast heartache we feel for his family. On Wednesday afternoon, as his family experienced such an unspeakable horror in that hospital across town here in Lincoln, I drove the streets fighting back tears as I considered how lucky I was going to be to receive hugs from my oldest son at preschool pickup that day. I thanked God for my toddler barking orders in the backseat. Every time I think about his family and friends, I say a prayer. I have no idea exactly what to request in those prayers, but I trust that God can sort through my incoherent blubbering. I also trust that He knows exactly what it is you all need, and that it will be provided.

Although we mourn, we are able to extract one glimmer of humanity from such a dark day. Back when Cody and his W-P classmate and best friend T.J. Ellicott, went to obtain their learners' permits, both made the conscious and heroic choice to register as organ donors. From the last report I heard, Cody's organs were able to be transplanted into seven other people. Seven desperate souls found new life this week because of a generous decision Cody made years ago. If Cody's spirit can transfer over through the process, those seven souls will be doubly blessed.

Wednesday was a difficult day in our household, as it was far and wide. As much as I tried, in vain, to shield him from the news, my five-year-old son, Jack, overheard many of the updates on Cody's condition throughout the day. His questions and their answers brought forth a deluge of tears at the dinner table. I quickly explained that Cody was able to save lives because of his choice to be an organ donor. "This is all so sad. Dad, I don't know him, but Cody is my new hero," my son spoke through his tears.

Join the club, Jack. Join the club.

In death, new life.

In tragedy, a hero.

How could we expect anything less from Cody Fanning?

Sincerely, and with love,

Dave Vrbas, Lincoln