

Friends for life



ROGER DARRIGRAND/Staff photo
Pinkerton Academy senior Colby Verge, 18, and his lifelong friend Brianna Natoli, 18, get ready to go to Salem High School's senior prom at the Atkinson Country Club last night. In addition to taking three years of sign language to help him communicate with Natoli, Verge has escorted her to junior and senior prom and plans to major in rehabilitation and disability therapy next year in college.

'She's been an inspiration through my whole life'

Lifelong friendship binds unlikely pair

By Eric Parry

eparry@eagletribune.com

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SALEM, N.H. — When three-sport athlete Colby Verge was in therapy for his second torn ACL in a year, he thought about Brianna Natoli and knew his knee problems weren't a big deal.

Brianna, an 18-year-old senior at Salem High School, has special needs and will never be able to accomplish some of the things Colby has. She has cerebral palsy, is hearing impaired, and has a seizure disorder.

Best friends since birth, Colby, 18, last night followed through with a promise he made to Brianna when they were children. He took her to her senior prom at Atkinson Country Club.

"She's normal to me," Colby said. "She's been an inspiration through my whole life."

After taking pictures at her Salem home, Colby and Brianna — glowing in a pink dress — drove off to their second prom together. They traveled in Brianna's favorite car, Colby's mother's purple PT Cruiser.

"I told Brianna that when she goes to dance with Colby, she can ride in my car," Colby's mother, Patty, said.

Last year, Colby took Brianna to his prom at Pinkerton Academy, but they almost didn't make it. Colby was afraid he would have to miss the prom because of a lacrosse game at Dartmouth, but his coach said a date with Brianna was more important than a game.

"He knew from day one that she was the one who he would take to the prom," Brianna's mom, Patty Natoli, said.

Colby's and Brianna's parents have been friends since before their children were born. Brianna was born a month before Colby and the two have grown up together. When they were younger, Colby said, he never noticed her disabilities.

"We would play catch together and I didn't even realize there was anything wrong," he said. Their friendship has endured and both have been the better for it.

Brianna is Colby's biggest fan. Every week, she is on the sidelines, cheering Colby on — in football, basketball and lacrosse. All of his teammates and coaches know her and expect to see her cheering. When Colby plays basketball at Springfield College, he knows Brianna will be there to cheer him on.

Standing just about 6 feet tall, Brianna is an athlete herself. She competes in track at Salem High School. The friends enjoy playing basketball and other sports together, Colby said.

"If she were normal, she would be a Division I athlete," he said.

But it's not all about sports. Brianna has had an effect on Colby's life off the field as well.

When he heads to Springfield College in the fall, Colby said he is thinking of pursuing a career working with special needs children.

"She has definitely had a big impact on my life," he said. After graduating from Salem High School next month, Brianna will continue her education at the Merrimack Education Center in Billerica, Mass., for the next three years. She will learn life skills there.

When they were younger, Brianna taught Colby how to sign a few words and they would communicate through a special language they developed. When Colby entered high school, he began taking sign language classes so the two could communicate better. He credits Brianna with his success on the field.

"She's taught me to never give up," he said. "She can't do anything to change it, but she fights every day."

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