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Senior doesn't let challenges hold him back

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HOLLIS – Even under the best circumstances, getting through high school is a challenge.

Add family problems and medical issues, and it's even more of a struggle.

For 18-year-old Bill Baerthlein, of Hollis, who will be among the more than 220 graduates at Hollis/Brookline High School on June 14, it will be the end of a journey some thought he might not complete.

"I've seen very few individuals in life (like Bill)," said Frank Tkaczyk, coordinator of the student support program at the high school known as GATES, Greater Academic, Therapeutic, and Emotional Support. "He struggled with a variety of issues and decided to take control of his own life, to look at himself, decide to make the most of what he's got."

During his early childhood, he suffered from headaches and nightmares, the effect of upheaval in his family including his parents' divorce. Later, he battled Attention Deficit Disorder, Post Traumatic Stress Disorder and depression.

"I had a hard time focusing in class. It was difficult to get my class work done," the high school senior said during a recent interview in the guidance office, accompanied by a school counselor.

The summer after freshman year – as the result of inactivity and medication – Baerthlein had put on so much weight he was having trouble keeping up with his teammates on the school's lacrosse team.

Earlier this week, the school's lacrosse team won the state's Division III title. It was an emotional high for Baerthlein and other members of the team.

That triumph is in stark contrast to his earlier years in high school when Baerthlein was so overwhelmed he was unable to attend many of his classes.

Bob Zimmerman, his high school counselor, said Baerthlein had to ration his energy, deciding which classes he could afford to miss when he went to the nurse's office to rest.

"We didn't expect him to graduate," Zimmerman said.

Two days before the last day of 10th-grade, Baerthlein was in the resource room at the high school when he was overcome by feelings of stress.

"I completely shut down, and I had to be taken home," he said, recalling his embarrassment when he returned to school the next day.

Summer vacation wasn't much better, at least not the first part.

"I was having a hard time, completely shutting down," Baerthlein said,

When a spot opened at a residential therapeutic camp near Hillsboro, he took it, finishing out the remaining three weeks of a six-week program.

"It was a relief being there," he said of the Wediko program. "I made friends. I came back really excited about going back to school. I had learned a whole lot about myself and what I needed, how to cope with stress and remove myself from stressful situations."

Some of those situations had been ongoing.

For years, Baerthlein, who suffers from allergies, carried a paper towel for blowing his nose. And for years, some classmates had teased him by mimicking the way he held the tissue and blew his nose.

"It was little stuff like that," he said. "I learned that it's their problem, not mine."

The following summer, Baerthlein returned to the residential camp for the entire season.

"I made a complete turnaround," he said, describing his involvement in a mentorship program where he assisted with younger children at the camp.

In addition, he took on several paying jobs at the camp and earned \$400.

"I really came back a new man," he said.

At school, his senior workload was lighter, and he was able to attend most classes.

His doctor discontinued his medicines, and he began socializing more.

"I had been completely closing myself off to people, and I started to go to school dances," Baerthlein said. "I used to eat lunch alone, and I started socializing at lunch."

His mother bought a second car, making a car available for her son to drive to football games.

He also took a job as a bagger at a Market Basket supermarket in Nashua where he made new friends.

"I was hanging out with my friends instead of being so lost in myself," he said.

As a junior, he had been held back from the varsity lacrosse team while his friends moved forward.

During his senior year, he increased his training and improved enough to join his friends on the varsity team.

This season, he scored five goals in his position as attack.

"I felt a lot more accepted. I really came out of my shell," he said of life as a senior.

When he accepts his diploma, Baerthlein will be taking a ceremonial step toward his next goal: completion of a postgraduate program at Bridgeton Academy in Maine.

After, he plans to go to college.

He said he wants to do work "that makes a difference to future generations." He is thinking about psychology or journalism.

"I want to tell people, 'You don't want to give up. There's always a way out of the situation you're in,'" he said. "You've got to be able to ask for help."

The graduating senior said he is certain that without help, he would have become another dismal statistic.

"I probably would have dropped out a long time ago," he said. "It was hard for me, but all the support at the school and the camp really made the difference for me, and it's really because of them that I'm graduating this year."

The Hollis/Brookline High School graduation is Saturday, June 14, at 10 a.m.

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