

Kerri Bessette, January 10, 1982 - April 12, 2001

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Meningitis Alert



Division of Student Affairs

[Latest News](#)

Joseph J. Cicala, Ph.D., Dean of Students

1900 W. Olney Ave. • Philadelphia, PA 19141-1199 • (215) 951-1017

[Meningitis Update-2](#)

Early this morning, we learned that one of our resident students, Kerri Bessette, a freshman elementary/special education major from Rhode Island, is undergoing treatment for a suspected case of bacterial meningitis. I am writing to advise you of the situation and of the steps that have been taken in response.

[Meningitis Update-1](#)

University staff members are communicating directly with Kerri's classmates, fellow St. Francis Hall residents, track teammates, and others who with whom she may have had close contact within approximately the past seven days, and with the families of any students with whom we communicate. We are advising them of this situation and asking that individuals who have had close contact with Kerri consult with the staff of the Student Health Center, by phone or in person. The staff will assist them in determining whether or not treatment, in the form of one dose of a particular antibiotic, is necessary. If it is, the Student Health Center staff will provide that treatment -- with no charge -- or assist them in obtaining it. If treatment is needed, it should be received by this coming Thursday, April 12, 2001.

[Meningitis Alert](#)

Individuals who are in doubt about whether or not their contact with Kerri during this period was "close" are advised not to hesitate to contact the Student Health Center.

[CDC Meningitis Web Site](#)

Students who have not yet been immunized against meningitis should consider it and consult with the Student Health Center staff about becoming immunized.

If you have additional questions of a medical nature about this matter, please contact the Student Health Center at (215) 951-1565. If you have other questions about this matter, please contact my office, in care of any of the means of communication listed at the top of this memorandum, or the special hotline number we will set up as of early this evening, (215) 951-5085. Inquiries from the media should be directed to University Communications, (215) 951-1080.

Joseph J. Cicala, Ph.D.

Dean of Students, La Salle University

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Meningitis Update



Division of Student Affairs

Joseph J. Cicala, Ph.D., Dean of Students

1900 W. Olney Ave. • Philadelphia, PA 19141-1199 • (215) 951-1017 • FAX (215) 951-1942 • cicala@lasalle.edu

MEMORANDUM

TO: The University Community

DATE: April 11, 2001

SUBJECT: Meningitis Update

I am writing, on behalf of the staff, faculty, and students who have been working on the community's behalf these past two days, to give you more current and additional information about our meningitis alert.

Kerri Bessette's status

We are happy to report that Kerri's medical condition has been upgraded from "serious," which it was all day yesterday, to "fair" today. She remains in Albert Einstein Medical Center. Her family is with her.

The status of our efforts to inform and assist the University community

As of this writing, we are confident that we have made direct phone, in-person, and/or written contact with more than 90% of the students and others who were most likely to have been in contact with Kerri during the past week and with the students' families, as well. Our information hotline (215-951-5085) has been operational since late Tuesday afternoon. Our Student Health Center staff have seen and assisted a great many of our students and others.

Open Forum on Thursday

We believe it will be helpful for interested or concerned members of the University community to be able to ask and have their questions answered in a community setting. We have, therefore, arranged for an open forum on our meningitis alert and on meningitis, in general, to be held in the Dan Rodden Theatre from 12:30 p.m. until 1:30 p.m. on Thursday, April 12. Panelists, including one or more of our consulting physicians, representatives of the Division of Student Affairs, including our Student Health Center staff, Intercollegiate Athletics and Recreation, and others, will provide information and respond to questions. A brief video on meningitis, produced by the American College Health Association, will be shown.

Understanding Meningitis

Meningitis can be contracted only through "close, personal contact." This means that, sometime within the past seven days, you would have been face to face (within two feet) with an infected individual for at least two consecutive hours or you would have shared a water bottle or other drink container, food, cigarettes, etc.

If it is determined, in consultation with a member of our Student Health Center staff, that you might be at risk because of close, personal contact, you may receive an antibiotic pill called Cipro, which acts as a preventative. La Salle University is making Cipro available at no charge for those members of our community who require it. While a meningitis vaccine is available and while we encourage all of our students to become vaccinated if they have not already been, vaccine would have no beneficial effect on the current situation and so may be scheduled later at a convenient date.

What to do if you have additional questions or concerns

Our Student Health Center will be open during normal operating hours (8:30 a.m. until 4:30 p.m.) Thursday, April 12 and will then be closed for the Easter holiday recess until Tuesday, April 17 at 8:30 a.m.

Our normal after-hours/weekend procedures will be in effect during the Easter holiday recess. Students and others who have health-related needs during those times should contact La Salle Security (215-951-1111) and/or the Resident Director on duty. Those contacted will be able to secure medical advice and/or obtain emergency care and/or arrange for prompt transportation to the appropriate local medical facility (usually the emergency room of Germantown Hospital or Albert Einstein Medical Center).

Students or others who wish to consult with medical personnel about meningitis, specifically, and, if need be, obtain the antibiotic treatment described above should go or request transportation to the Germantown Hospital emergency room. The staff there is standing by to provide advice and treatment, by arrangement with La Salle University.

Our information hotline (215-951-5085) will continue to be operational throughout the Easter holiday recess. Members of our staff will regularly check the hotline's voice mail box during that period and will respond as quickly as possible to callers following

each check.

On behalf of all of us who are working to serve our community during this situation, I extend best wishes for a happy and blessed Easter. Please keep Kerri and her family in your prayers, as well. Sincerely, Joseph J. Cicala Joseph J. Cicala, Ph.D. Dean of Students, La Salle University cicala@lasalle.edu -- (215) 951-1017

Sincerely,

Joseph J. Cicala, Ph.D.

Dean of Students, La Salle University

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Meningitis Update



Division of Student Affairs

Joseph J. Cicala, Ph.D., Dean of Students

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MEMORANDUM

TO: The University Community

DATE: April 12, 2001

SUBJECT: Meningitis Update

I have just learned that Kerri Bessette's condition has worsened and that she, her family, and the staff of Albert Einstein Medical Center are very much in need of our prayers. As of this writing, Kerri is listed in critical condition. Members of our University Ministry & Service and Counseling Center staff are on their way to the hospital to be with Kerri's family, in association with our Student Health Center staff. As of this writing, today's open forum at 12:30 p.m. in the Dan Rodden Theatre still will be held.

Joseph J. Cicala, Ph.D.

Dean of Students, La Salle University

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MEMORANDUM

TO: The University Community

DATE: April 12, 2001

SUBJECT: Meningitis Update

Dear friends,

I am very sorry to inform you that Kerri Bessette passed away at 6:07 p.m. today. The Sacrament of the Sick was celebrated by our Campus Minister, Father David Beebe.

Division of Student Affairs staff will be available immediately and for as long as they are needed in the Sts. Edward and Francis Halls main lounge to provide assistance and support among Kerri's fellow residents, teammates, classmates, and other friends.

The De La Salle Chapel will be open immediately and for as long as needed for all who wish to worship or simply gather together in Kerri's memory. A liturgy in Kerri's memory will be celebrated at 4:30 p.m. this coming Tuesday, April 17, 2001.

Additional information will be shared with the community, as it becomes available, via the La Salle University web-site (www.lasalle.edu).

I know that Kerri's family has been comforted by our prayers and support these past days and I know, as well, that our prayers accompany Kerri as she joins Our Lord.

Joseph J. Cicala, Ph.D.

Dean of Students, La Salle University

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MEMORANDUM

TO: The University Community

DATE: April 15, 2001

SUBJECT: Kerri Bessette

I learned this morning of Kerri's funeral arrangements, as outlined below.

Tuesday, April 17, 2001 Calling Hours Forbes Funeral Home

4:00 p.m. – 7:00 p.m. Columbia Street

Wakefield, Rhode Island

Wednesday, April 18, 2001 Funeral St. Francis Church

10:00 a.m. High Street

Wakefield, Rhode Island

Kerri's father informed me that, in lieu of flowers, Kerri's memory may be honored by donations, which may be sent to Citizens' Bank in Wakefield, to a scholarship fund being established at her *alma mater*, South Kingstown High School. I will provide further details as soon as I have them.

Notes of condolence may be sent to Kerri's parents, William and Kathleen, and her brother, Scott, in care of their home address, 78 Bedford Drive, Wakefield, RI 02879.

Liturgies in Kerri's memory will be celebrated in our De La Salle Chapel at 5:00 p.m. on Tuesday, April 17, 2001 and at 1:00 p.m. on Wednesday, April 18, 2001. An additional liturgy and/or memorial service, in which Kerri's family will participate, will be scheduled in the near future.

Joseph J. Cicala, Ph.D.

Dean of Students, La Salle University

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La Salle student dies of meningitis complications

Kerri Bessette, 19, was an education major and a member of the track team. The public is not at risk, officials said.

ASSOCIATED PRESS

A La Salle University student died last night of complications from bacterial meningitis.

Kerri Bessette, 19, a freshman from Wakefield, R.I., died at Albert Einstein Medical Center shortly after 6 p.m. She had majored in special education and elementary education and was a distance runner on the university track team.

Her father and mother, William and Kathleen Bessette, and her brother, Scott, 22, a student at Seton Hall University, were with her the last few days, according to La Salle officials.

"On behalf of the entire La Salle community, I want to express our heartfelt condolences to the Bessette family on the tragic death of their daughter, Kerri. Our prayers are with them," said Brother Michael McGinniss, the university president.

"We are filled with grief at the sudden passing of Kerri, who was such an energetic student athlete, volunteer, and overall model member to our university family."

At the Olney campus last night, school and city health officials said Ms. Bessette's death presented no danger to the public. Her condition had been upgraded to fair before the complications.

Health officials characterized the infection complications as rare. "We do not expect a second case on a college campus," said Robert Levenson of the city

Health Department.

Students on campus last night called Ms. Bessette a friendly, likable person and dedicated teammate. A memorial service at the university is planned for next week.

On Wednesday, university officials notified Ms. Bessette's classmates and track teammates, residents at her dormitory, the parents of those students, and some employees of her condition. An antibiotic was provided free of charge.

Officials said last night that all those known to have had close contact with Ms. Bessette had received the antibiotic.

According to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, meningitis can be contracted only through close personal contact with an infected person. Early symptoms include fever, headache, vomiting, a rash, a stiff neck, lethargy and disorientation. Someone with meningitis may also have low blood pressure and a fast heart rate.

Grieving for a lost student

The La Salle runner died of complications from meningitis. "We've lost a sister," teammates said.

By James M. O'Neill
INQUIRER STAFF WRITER

Every Good Friday for the last few years, Kerri Bessette joined members of her Rhode Island high school track team in a six-mile run to raise money for a soup kitchen.

But when the group met yesterday, many team members learned from their coach that Bessette, 19, a La Salle University freshman, had died Thursday night of complications from bacterial meningitis.

"The kids are devastated," said Joyce Harvey, the track coach at South Kingstown High. "It's amazing what kind of impact Kerri had on so many other students."

The scene was much the same on the La Salle campus Thursday night after word spread that Bessette had died.

"This is such a horrible and tragic thing to happen to someone so young and with so much ahead of her," Bessette's college track teammates wrote in a statement. "This team is . . . like a family and we've lost a sister. Kerri brought so much joy and enthusiasm."

Bessette, a special-education major, had attended classes on April 6, and she even ran in a track meet hosted by the University of Pennsylvania on Sunday.

But Monday, she felt ill and missed class. Her mother took her to Germantown Hospital, where tests revealed she had bacterial meningitis, a life-threatening and contagious disease.

Bessette was transferred to Albert Einstein Medical Center, and, after receiving word of the disease on Tuesday morning, La Salle officials started to notify those who had been in recent contact with her.

The university has not issued any other reports of illness.

Joseph J. Cicala, dean of students, said La Salle officials first told the students who lived on the same floor in Bessette's dorm, St. Francis Hall. They contacted the men's and women's track teams. They spoke with students in the classes Bessette took this semester.

Then they broadened notification to others far less at risk, including Penn's athletics department, and people at Elwood Elementary School, where Bessette had been assigned to get field experience as part of her degree requirements.

Unlike viral meningitis, which is common and requires no treatment, bacterial meningitis must be treated quickly with large doses of intravenous antibiotics. It affects up to 5,000 young people in the United States each year.

Last year, there were four reported cases in Philadelphia, resulting in one death.

Those who come in direct contact with someone who has bacterial meningitis are at risk of getting it.

However, because the bacteria are spread only through the exchange of respiratory and throat secretions, it is not as contagious as the cold or flu, according to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control.

Only people who have had face-to-face contact over several hours are at great risk, and the disease cannot be spread by simply breathing the air where someone with the disease has been.

Officials have not released information on how Bessette became infected.

Still, worried that Bessette might possibly have shared a water bottle with track teammates, La Salle officials gave many of them a preventive antibiotic, called

Cipro.

They also made the drug available to anyone on campus who thought they might be at risk.

College freshmen are among those more susceptible to meningitis because of their close quarters, but city health officials said they do not expect another case to crop up on a college campus.

La Salle has made vaccinations against meningitis available to students on a voluntary basis during the last two years, but vaccination is only partially successful, because vaccines exist against only some of the bacteria responsible, and the protection lasts for a limited time.

Cicala said Bessette received such a vaccination three years ago.

After improving on Wednesday, her condition worsened, and shortly after 6 p.m. Thursday she died.

Bessette's family was traveling back to Rhode Island yesterday, and there was no word yet on funeral arrangements.

"Kerri was truly an angel among us," said Harvey, her high school track coach.

"I don't think I ever saw her not smiling," said Sherry Hathaway, Bessette's cross-country coach in high school. "The younger runners were so upset when she left for college, because she took so many of them under her wing and tried to make them feel a part of the team. She just lit up the world."

Harvey said Bessette often made pins, barrettes, and other small gifts for teammates to get them pumped up for meets.

She said the Bessette family, including her parents, William and Kathleen, and brother, Scott, a student at Seton Hall University, sometimes hosted the entire team of 55 girls at their house for pasta dinners.

At South Kingstown High, Bessette participated in a peer-tutoring program, and at La Salle, she had joined the Big Brothers/Big Sisters program.

"She was really good with kids and used to baby-sit all the time," said close friend Katie Parkinson, 19, who had known Bessette since they were in kindergarten.

Parkinson said the two liked to go in-line skating along a bike path that skirts Narragansett Bay.

Harvey said that Bessette, a captain of the track team, was a key reason the squad won consecutive Rhode Island state championships.

"She didn't score the most points, but she was the glue our team was made of," Harvey said. "She took care of everyone. She has enriched all our lives."

James M. O'Neill's e-mail address is
joneill@phillynews.com.

Wakefield woman dies of bacterial meningitis

■ Kerri Bessette contracted the illness while at college in Philadelphia.

BY ANDREW GOLDSMITH

Journal Staff Writer

Kerri Bessette, 19, a former all-state cross-country star at South Kingstown High School whom friends described as upbeat and outgoing, died in Philadelphia Thursday from complications of bacterial meningitis.

A freshman elementary- and special-education major at La Salle University, Bessette grew up in the South Kingstown village of Wakefield.

From the Video Junction youth soccer squad in South County to La Salle's cross-country and track teams, Bessette was a dedicated athlete, friends said yesterday. In 1999, she was the top finisher among girls in the Celebrate Summer 5K in Snug Harbor; a year later she improved her time by 3 minutes, to 21 minutes and 57 seconds, and was among the 10 fastest women.

Bessette did not neglect her studies, however. As a senior at South Kingstown, she made the honor roll every quarter, and her major at La Salle was a demanding one, requiring an early declaration of intent and a year of student teaching.

Bessette intended to teach kindergarten or first grade, said Ashley Matteson, a South Kingstown classmate. Bessette would have followed the career path of her mother, Kathy, who teaches special-education at Matunuck Elementary, Matteson said.

"She was so committed to everything that she started," said Jill Apicerno, another classmate. "Even in elementary school she was so dedicated to everything she did."

In junior high school, Apicerno said, Bessette belonged to South Kingstown Kids Against Temptation. She continued similar work in high school with Students Against Drunk Driving and a group called Youth to Youth.

According to the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, meningitis is an infection of the fluid of the spinal cord and the fluid that surrounds the brain. Viruses and bacteria can carry the disease, but the bacterial variety is usually more severe.

The disease is spread through close contact.

When La Salle officials learned of Bessette's illness earlier this week, the school's health center offered free antibiotics to students and staff who had been in recent contact with Bessette.

University officials notified the community of her death with a note posted on its Web site, and the Division of Student Affairs provided counseling for her schoolmates.

The Catholic university will celebrate a liturgy in Bessette's memory at 4:30 p.m. on Tuesday. Funeral arrangements were not complete yesterday afternoon.

KERRI L. BESSETTE - South Kingstown

KERRI L. BESSETTE, A Mass of Christian Burial for KERRI L. BESSETTE, 19, of Bedford Drive, Green Hill, a freshman at LaSalle University in Philadelphia, Pa., who died Thursday at the Albert Einstein Medical Center in Philadelphia after a sudden illness, will be celebrated Wednesday at 10 a.m. in St. Francis Church, High Street, Wakefield.

Born in South Kingstown, Jan. 10, 1982, a daughter of William R. and Kathleen M. (Sprague) Bessette, she was a lifelong resident of South County. Kerri was an honor roll graduate of South Kingstown High School, Class of 2000.

While at South Kingstown High, she was captain of the girls cross country team, which held the state championship from 1996 until 1999. She was captain of the girls track and field team, which also held the state championship from 1997 until 2000. This earned her a scholarship to LaSalle University in track and field.

In high school she began a Habitat for Humanities program and was involved in Students Against Drunk Driving. She played local softball and basketball, and played on a travel team in soccer. In college, she was a Big Sister and ran both indoor and outdoor track and field. She held several jobs locally, including at the Village Bakery and the Sea Horse Grill at Theater by the Sea.

Besides her parents, she leaves a brother, Scott D. Bessette of South Orange, N.J.; a paternal grandmother, Mae W. Bessette of Pawtucket; and maternal grandparents, Norman A. and Ruth Sprague, both of Peace Dale. She was the granddaughter of the late Bertrand M. Bessette.

Burial will be in St. Francis Cemetery, Peace Dale.

Community mourns death of track star

By: Laura Ricketson

April 18, 2001

PHILADELPHIA -- Former South Kingstown High School all-state cross country star and La Salle University freshman Kerri Bessette, 19, died last Thursday of complications due to bacterial meningitis.

By LAURA RICKETSON

PHILADELPHIA - Kerri Bessette, 19, a former South Kingstown High School all-state cross country star and a freshman at La Salle University, died last Thursday of complications from bacterial meningitis.

The elementary/special education major was at school in Philadelphia when she fell ill. Bessette grew up in Wakefield and was a distance runner for the university, where she had won a track and field scholarship.

To her friends, she was the one who always had a smile on her face and something encouraging to say.

"She was a bubbly, energetic, constantly smiling, brighten-your-day kind of person," said Jill Apicerno, a close friend since kindergarten. Some of her most precious memories of Bessette were their many years together as Girl Scouts. The two girls were always camp buddies, she said.

Bessette was an All-Division, All-Class runner from 1996-2000, and All State from 1997- 1999. She was also the captain of the women's cross-country team, which held the state championship from 1996-1999, and the captain of the track and field team, which won the state championships from 1997-2000.

Bessette, a Green Hill resident and lifelong South County resident, excelled off the playing field as much as she did on it.

She was an honor roll graduate in the class of 2000. She planned to teach kindergarten or first grade, something she "would have been great" at, friend Katie Parkinson said.

In high school, she began the Habitat for Humanity program, and was involved in Students Against Drunk Driving. She also did work with Youth to Youth, a teen leadership organization.

Bessette played local basketball and softball, and was part of a traveling soccer team, along with Apicerno.

When Bessette wasn't running for the indoor and outdoor track and field teams at La Salle, she was volunteering in her college community as a Big Sister. Back home, she held jobs as a babysitter, at the Village Bakery and the Sea Horse Grill at Theater by the Sea.

Ashley Matteson, who said she had been friends with Bessette "since they were in diapers," echoed Apicerno's sentiment.

She described her friend as "fun-loving, outgoing, and caring.

"She had her own sense of character, perfect," Matteson said Monday. "I know she had a wonderful life."

Parkinson, who was also on the track team with Bessette, described her longtime friend as someone who "cared so much to make everyone else happy. She always gave 100 percent with everything that she did, and she made everyone else do the same."

And on the playing field, Parkinson said Bessette was the unsung hero of her team.

"She was never the superstar, but she was the one who held the team together with her spirit."

Bessette always worked hard, even if she didn't always place first, and "was such a big part of the team."

In a statement to the LaSalle University the day Bessette died, Joseph J. Cicala, Ph.D., dean of students, said, "I know that Kerri's family has been comforted by our prayers and support these past days and I know, as well, that our prayers accompany Kerri as

she joins Our Lord."

La Salle held a liturgy in her memory yesterday, and the university division of student affairs is also offering assistance and support for students, friends and teammates.

"Reach for the stars and follow your dreams" is Bessette's senior quote in the 2000 South Kingstown High School yearbook. Along with messages to friends and her family, she is pictured with Apicerno, the two of them dressed in their Girl Scout uniforms in a picture from their younger years.

In a thank you to her coaches, Joyce Harvey and Sherry Hathaway, she wrote, "For everything you have taught me. I will miss you."

In addition to track and field and cross-country photos, Bessette is also pictured in an H & R Block soccer team photograph from 1990.

An ad from her family, along with two pictures of her as a child, reads, "The future is yours, reach for the stars and all your dreams will come true. Love, Dad, Mom and Scott."

According to school officials, her father William, mother Kathleen and her brother, a junior at Seton Hall University in New Jersey, were with her during her last days.

Meningitis is an infection of the spinal and brain fluid. According to the federal Center for Disease Control and Prevention, it is usually caused by a viral or bacterial infection. Bacterial meningitis is more severe than viral meningitis, and can lead to brain damage, hearing loss, learning disabilities, and in some instances, death, if not treated promptly. A person can only be infected with the illness through direct contact with an infected person.

"On behalf of the entire La Salle community, I want to express our heartfelt condolences to the Bessette family on the tragic death of their daughter, Kerri. Our prayers are with them," said university president Brother Michael McGinnis in a statement to a Philadelphia newspaper.

"We were very lucky to have her with us," said Parkinson. "Anyone who didn't know her is missing out."

Besides her parents, she leaves a brother, Scott D. Bessette; her paternal grandmother, Mae W. Bessette of Pawtucket; and her maternal grandparents. Norman A. and Ruth Sprague, both of Peace Dale. She was the granddaughter of the late Bertrand M. Bessette.

A Mass of Christian burial will be celebrated today at 10 a.m. in St. Francis Church on High Street, Wakefield. Burial will follow in St. Francis Cemetery in Peace Dale.

In lieu of flowers, donations may be sent to the Kerri Bessette Woman's Athletic Scholarship Fund, c/o Citizens Bank, 51 Main St., Wakefield, RI 02879.

In remembrance of Kerri

By: Laura Ricketson

April 20, 2001

SOUTH KINGSTOWN -- Funeral services are held for 19 year-old Kerri Bessette at St. Francis of Assisi church in Wakefield.

By LAURA RICKETSON

SOUTH KINGSTOWN - With a gray-green sky above, bright yellow daffodils bowed to the force of the windblown snow and rain outside St. Francis of Assisi Church Wednesday morning.

Nineteen-year-old Kerri L. Bessette, who died last Thursday of complications from bacterial meningitis, was laid to rest by her family, and hundreds of friends and teammates.

Dozens of police officers, outfitted in trench coats and caps, stood frozen like statues along the entrance to the church on High Street in Wakefield.

Mourners huddled together under black umbrellas, both for comfort and to keep out of the rain and snow, as they slowly mounted the church steps.

Ten pallbearers, former classmates at South Kingstown High School, carried Bessette's casket into the church, each of them struggling with the weight of their emotions, and a few wiping away tears.

Inside, mourners were seated shoulder to shoulder, 10 to 12 in a pew. The officers filed in and stood like soldiers against the walls.

Classmates, friends, school officials and others who knew Bessette wiped away flowing tears and tried to keep their chins from quivering as the family processed to the front pews.

When the church was filled to capacity, people filed into the church substory, where they could watch the service on two televisions.

"No one dies as long as there is someone left to remember them," the church bulletin reads. "And when there is no one left to remember, it doesn't matter because we will all be together."

Father Nicholas Smith celebrated the Mass of Christian Burial for the former South Kingstown High School track star and freshman at La Salle University in Philadelphia.

"This is a girl who did not have one mean, judgmental bone in her body," he said.

Two buses brought classmates and teammates from the university to services here. School administrators, including university president Brother Michael McGinnis, also made the trip.

"I bet you're all asking, 'why Kerri? Where was God that day?'" Smith said. "And there is no answer.

"All we can do is live our lives better, and love and rejoice in every day together." Smith cited a saying from his grandmother to try to explain Bessette's unexpected death.

"Life is like a train. We are all traveling on the train of life. Some of us get off sooner, some of us stay on for a long time. We all get off eventually," he said.

For those whose ride might be shorter, like Bessette's, he said, "They get off because they have reached their destination. And waiting for them at that stop is the Lord himself."

Bessette's brother Scott, a student at Seton Hall University described his sister as someone who "gave 110 percent in everything that she did. "You inspired me to be perfect," he said. "Kerri, you're number one."

Bessette's former coach, Joyce Harvey, described the cross country and track and field team captain as "an angel who walked among us."

Harvey said it was Bessette's generous, loving and compassionate nature that "taught us what is was like to be a friend."

And her smile, she said, could have brightened even this cloudy day.

"And with your beautiful smile, you brought sunshine into all of our lives," she said tearfully. "You embodied all that is good in athletics," both in ability and spirit. "And your beautiful spirit will be forever young."

Quoting a poem, Harvey said, "Some people come into our lives, and quickly go. Others stay for a while, and leave footprints on our hearts, and we are never, ever the same."

In between sobs, a group of Bessette's teammates and close friends read poetry and sent their own messages of remembrance.

Josie Fox read a message to Bessette from her parents, William and Kathleen.

"Daughter, you are in our hearts forever," she read. Fox described how Bessette's parents felt when their daughter, after being born, grabbed their finger with her hand for the first time.

"Your smile was the sunshine in our hearts. Your happiness was the only treasure we ever sought."

Letting go of their daughter is not easy, she continued, as the Bessettes said they still feel their hearts swell with pride and joy for their daughter.

"Even though your hand may slip from ours, our hands will hold you in our hearts forever."