By: Cassidy Lego

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**Roger Brent Scott: A Legacy Built Through Tragedy**

*How One Student Turned Grief into Selfless Passion – In Memory of Leah Berhanu*

High school graduation symbolizes the beginning of new life for many. Standing shoulder-to-shoulder, row-by-row, it is one of the most nerve-wracking and extraordinary emotional roller coasters to grace the lives of young adults. The awkward years of adolescence are times of the past, as suddenly teenagers are thrust into the adult world of the unknown. Personal bubbles of comfort and security are popped as a neatly rolled parchment paper is passed on with a farewell handshake. A final completion of the longest and most predominant accomplishment to date. In the time that follows thoughts wonder to what will become of those with which youth had been spent. What journey their strengths will lead them on. Unfortunately for some, their journey goes awry and is cut short.

Roger Brent Scott, or Brent Scott, is active with the West Virginia University (WVU) Student Government Association (SGA) and recently named Representative of the Year. He also devotes time towards the Pedestrian Safety Board.

Scott was one of 23 students in his high school graduation class, where he befriended Leah Berhanu. Their tale goes back as far as those dreadful middle school days, although Leah’s presence never failed to brighten the mood.

“Leah and I were close in high school but went different directions and made our own individual friend groups once we were in college at WVU. We had this handshake we always did in class that we made up in middle school, and every time I would see her on High Street or walking to class we would do the handshake, even through the first half of our senior year of college,” said Scott.

To Scott and others who knew her, Leah was one of a kind. An incredible human being with goals bigger than herself. She was an immaculate singer with a gracious personality. Scott describes Leah as the kind of girl who took your breath away with a smile, a smile you just couldn’t look away from.

“She will be remembered as someone that exemplifies what it means to be a West Virginian and a Mountaineer. She would take the shirt off her back for anyone, go the extra mile even if it meant nothing for her,” said Scott.

Feb. 1 is the day Leah, a 21-year-old civil engineering student, was struck and killed by a vehicle while crossing at the intersection of Morrill Way and Patteson Drive. The driver failed to stop at a red light.

When tragedy occurs in a town like Morgantown, students and faculty unite to mourn and support one another, as Mountaineers do. Although, it’s not uncommon for a tragedy to begin to fade into something of the past. When the initial wave of shock has passed through the community, the topic of conversation begins to change as people move on with their daily lives. This isn’t the case for those who knew Leah. For them, she is missed every day.

“I remember exactly where I was when I got the news that Leah had been struck and killed. I knew immediately that we had to do something about this and I have been committed to not letting Leah’s death go in vain,” said Scott.

That following Monday, he attended a Morgantown Pedestrian Safety Board meeting and began developing strategies to prevent an event like this from ever happening again. Stemming from the Pedestrian Safety Board, the Pedestrian Safety Working Group was created by the University. Scott is an active member of this group. As of February, this team has been conducting meetings throughout the school year and has created an “Action Plan.” This plan is full of goals to achieve within the next six months to five years.

The Pedestrian Safety Working Group and the Pedestrian Safety Board’s ultimate goal is to have zero pedestrian deaths. Morgantown, as a community, must improve on their interest and involvement with pedestrian safety.

“I cannot stress enough how important it is to watch out for our fellow Mountaineers. If you see a friend texting while driving, say something. If your friends are not using crosswalks on streets with heavy traffic or taking unnecessary risks while on campus, please say something. We are a family and it’s about time we start acting like it,” Scott asserted.

Although Leah’s accident happened months ago, the issue remains at large and should never be silenced. The students and University as a whole must keep the conversation alive by providing education to incoming freshman and being proactive about road conditions and surroundings.

“Robert Kennedy once said, ‘Tragedy is a tool for the living to gain wisdom, not a guide by which we should live.’ There should not be a single pedestrian fatality on this campus with the amount of technology, funding and resources this university has,” said Scott.

The Pedestrian Safety Board, with the help of Scott and many other students, continue their advocacy for the safety of fellow Mountaineers. Scott and others on the board are working on creating and distributing reflective buttons for students to wear on their backpacks at night. Larger plans for the future include the repainting of crosswalk lines and sidewalks, as well as creating mandatory educational models for pedestrian safety for students and conducting surveys to increase awareness.

“Student safety should be what our University resources go to before all else. That’s what we fight for, that’s why we keep the conversation alive. That’s what needs to be done so lives like Leah’s are not carelessly lost due to negligence,” said Scott, regarding the need for pedestrian walking bridges.

It is important we keep this conversation going. We must remember the shock and sorrow we felt after Leah’s death. Life can be taken away from us in an instant.

Scott will graduate this December with a political science degree and a minor in leadership studies. No doubt, what Scott will miss most on graduation day is that silly handshake he once shared with Leah. Although Leah is no longer here her legacy will live on through the efforts of Scott, the Pedestrian Safety Board, Student Government Association, and the University as they advocate for the safety of the community.

“Pedestrian safety is at the forefront of conversation at WVU,” Scott said, “and it’s about damn time.”

For more information on the Pedestrian Safety Board, or if you are interesting in getting involved in WVU’s efforts, please contact Chairman Matthew Cross at [crossnyc@hotmail.com](mailto:crossnyc@hotmail.com).

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