

BULLDOG PRIDE FUND RECEIVES 3 ANONYMOUS GIFTS TOTALING \$500:

~ In Memory of M. Anthony Castro ~ (Oct. 25, 1987 – Jan. 21, 2007) ~



The Brilliant Life of Anthony Castro

By L.Z. Granderson, *ESPN.com*: Page 2

From what I know of Michael Anthony Castro, he would not like this column. ~ He would have been uncomfortable with all the focus being on him. A leader in the true sense of the word, Anthony was the kind of guy who avoided the spotlight, preferring to lead by example. Of course, that rarely stopped the spotlight from finding him.

A four-year starter for the Banning High [School] Broncos when the team's starting quarterback was ruled academically ineligible, Anthony, a 6-foot, 210-pound fullback, volunteered to take his place. He had never played the position before, but that didn't stop the Broncos' captain from making all-conference.

Anthony was also captain of the swim team, a member of the wrestling squad and part of the yearbook staff. Despite his being the big man on campus, freshmen felt comfortable enough around him to ask for help if they were being bullied by other upperclassmen. Teachers loved him, and the girls adored him. In six years, there had been only one graduation party [that the] principal, Jim Broncatello, stayed at until the end. It was Anthony's.

"He was just an amazing kid," Broncatello said. "He gave a lot to the people around him. When he graduated, we all knew he was going to go on to do some amazing things in his life. Then something like this happens ..." ~ "It is always tragic when one of your kids dies, and I consider all of my students my

kids," Broncatello said. "But it's especially hard when it's someone so special."

It is said that God works in mysterious ways. The people of Banning, Calif., are trying to figure out why he called this beautiful soul home after only 19 years. Anthony died last [Sunday] after the driver of the truck he was riding in lost control of the vehicle and crashed more than 120 feet into a ravine. His funeral is today [Fri., Jan. 26, 2007].

I never had the pleasure of meeting Anthony, but when I read about his story, tears filled my eyes—in large part because he died so young, but also because he lived so courageously. You see Michael Anthony Castro, the three-sport star athlete and most popular kid in [the] school, was openly gay. [He] came out [of the closet] when he was a sophomore.

"He caught a lot of crap over the first six to nine months after coming out," says Phil Takacs, a Banning High counselor. "Sometimes he would come to my office and ask if he could just spend the rest of the day there. He would say that he couldn't take being called 'faggot' any more today and just needed a break. He even thought about quitting sports. But over time, Anthony just got tired of the other kids making him feel bad for who he was.

"One day he was in practice and one of the other wrestlers was giving him a bunch of crap about being gay. Anthony looked at the kid and said 'You have a problem with me; why don't we take this to the mat?' This guy wrestled in the heaviest division, but Anthony pinned him in less than 30 seconds. That guy never said anything else again."

Takacs became Anthony's guardian after Anthony's mother showed him the door shortly after he came out at 16. Takacs, who is also gay, said initially he was concerned about having Anthony stay with him for fear of disparaging rumors, but he didn't want to see Anthony out in the cold either. ~ "We're a redneck little town out here," Takacs said. "My partner and I were always scared living here because we always thought our asses would get kicked. But Anthony taught me a lot. He taught us all a lot. He made it OK to be gay."

Garth Jensen, Banning's football coach, said his fondest memory of Anthony is watching him run over a linebacker during an option play. "You know, normally the QB just slides or runs out of bounds," Jensen said. "He just lowered his shoulder and 'bam!' The guy never knew what hit him."

Jensen said that, when Anthony was a student, he had heard rumors his team's captain was gay but that he didn't know for sure until the memorial service held at the high school shortly after last week's accident. Not that it mattered to him. "No one wanted to win more than him," Jensen said. "He was a workhorse on the field and a really great kid off of it."

Jim Buzinski, co-founder of *Outsports.com* and author of the first story I read about Anthony, played on a gay flag football team with him. He said the most remarkable thing about Anthony was the impact he had on people who had been out of the closet much longer than he had. ~ "He never saw himself as special," Buzinski said. "He just lived his life with dignity and strength. Despite all the things he'd gone through, he never complained. He just handled it ... and a lot of the older guys on the team looked up to him, including me." [Editor's Note: Castro played receiver and defensive back for the flag football team with LA Motion in a tournament at the 2006 Gay Games in Chicago].

After graduation, Anthony attended Riverside Community College and moved in with his boyfriend, Cody Mariscal, who had graduated from Banning [High] four years earlier and competed on the football, swim and track teams there.

"I was too scared to come out when I was in high school," says Mariscal. "There were no gay people when I was there, and it is very tough to be openly gay outside of school because we live in such a small town. But if there's one thing that Anthony taught me, it's to stop being afraid. ~ "I loved him very much. He changed my life, and I'll never be the same without him." ~ Neither will Banning High.

Takacs said that there are now 10 openly gay students at the school that he is aware of and that the community is a lot more tolerant. ~ "Anthony changed a lot of people's attitudes about gay people by simply having the strength to follow his heart," Takacs said.

As I looked over my notes detailing Anthony's life, I was reminded of a line from one of my favorite Dolly Parton songs, "Travelin' Thru."— *God made me for a reason and nothing is in vain / Redemption comes in many shapes with many kinds of pain / Oh sweet Jesus if you're listening, keep me ever close to you / As I'm stumblin', tumblin', wonderin', as I'm travelin' thru.*

It was then I decided to dedicate my weekly [*ESPN.com*] column to Anthony by renaming it "Travelin' Thru." It will serve as a constant reminder to me that one of the most important things any of us can do is be ourselves. ~ You just never know who's counting on us to do so. ~ L.Z. Granderson writes for *ESPN The Magazine* and hosts *ESPN360* talk show "Game Night." ~ Photos by Brent Mullins.



~ Revised from *ESPN.com* ~ Published Jan. 30, 2007 ~

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