

Clairmont: Tears as mom accepts slain son's degree from Mac

He should have stepped across the stage, beaming, to accept his hard-earned engineering degree.

He should have known his tenacity and prayers had paid off.

He should have posed for photos with his mom and grandma, the women who raised him.

And he should have known his future was just beginning and it was bright.

Yet that is not how convocation went for Tyler Johnson.

Instead, it took place in a small and quiet room at Hamilton Place, away from the crowds of cheering graduates. His degree was not handed to him, but rather to his mother, Linda Johnson.

The tears were bittersweet, acknowledging Tyler's accomplishment but also the huge hole that has existed since Nov. 30 — the day he was murdered.

Now the bright and promising mechanical engineer has been granted his degree posthumously by McMaster University faculty.

Before he was gunned down, he had earned enough credits to complete his Bachelor of Applied Science (BASc) in Mechanical Engineering, with honours.

And he had accepted a full scholarship to continue at Mac in a graduate program.

"I was so proud," Linda says of the moment her only child's university degree was bestowed on her. "I was thinking he should have been there, getting it. He worked so hard for that."

She pauses to cry, and around her are a half-dozen relatives and friends, also weeping.

Tyler, 30, was loved by many.

He was with friends at 3 a.m. on a Saturday when he was shot with a handgun outside a downtown pita shop. Six people are now accused in his death.

First-degree murder charges have been laid against Josh Barreira, 25, his brother Brandon Barreira, 19, Chad Davidson, 34, and Louis Rebelo, 26.

Jennifer Dagenais, 28, and Ashley Dore-Davidson, 27, are charged with accessory after the fact to murder.

It is unclear why Tyler was murdered.

His birth was also shrouded in mystery.

"I wasn't supposed to be able to get pregnant. So he was a miracle right from the beginning," says Linda, who lost her waitressing job just after the murder. "Tyler never met his father. He left when I was pregnant."

As a little guy, Tyler was "rambunctious." He was a Boy Scout and a brown belt in karate.

Always, at the centre of his life were Linda and his grandmother Alice.

Until he was 14 he went to church with Alice every Sunday. Later, when he took his own apartment, he joined his mom and grandma every Sunday for breakfast.

He went to Cathedral and Sir Winston Churchill high schools. But back then, school wasn't his thing. In Grade 10, he stopped going.

He pulled himself back on track, though, going to St. Charles Adult Education Centre to finish his high school diploma and then to Mohawk College, where he took mechanical engineering technology.

For five summers he worked for Robertson Building Systems and was offered a full-time job. Tyler turned it down to go to McMaster.

University was tough.

"He worked very hard at it," says Linda. "He didn't go out and have much fun ... Just passing wasn't good enough."

He dreamt of working for NASA.



Tyler Johnson's mom, Linda, and his grandmother, Alice, visit his memorial at McMaster University on Wednesday.

"His grades were very high," says Carlos Filipe, associate dean in the faculty of engineering. "He had a very, very good reputation."

Filipe says he knows of no other student in the department to be presented with a degree posthumously. The faculty wanted to honour Tyler because "he was part of our family" and because his mother "values education."

It is tradition for graduating engineers to pull pranks around campus, says Filipe. Tyler's class, however, wanted to honour him instead. So they erected a permanent memorial to him outside the John Hodgins engineering building.

Two days after Linda and Alice received Tyler's diploma, they interred his remains.

"There's bad days, and there's worse days," says Linda.

So how did a high school dropout go on to earn a graduate scholarship? What motivated Tyler?

Easy, say those who knew him well. He wanted a career that would allow him to take proper care of his mom and his grandmother for the rest of their lives.

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