

# Scholarship recipient is marching toward the future

Musician aims to make a difference in children's lives

By Andrea Russell for ATSSA



When Oklahoma Baptist University freshman Leah McCance makes the hour-and-a-half drive between her school in Shawnee and her hometown of Broken Arrow, she suspects she is more cautious than many of her fellow motorists.

The life-or-death importance of roadway safety is something Leah has understood for as long as she can remember. She was 21 months old when her father, Joshua Vann Isom McCance, was killed in a highway work zone incident.

"I want people to realize that making unwise decisions [while driving] impacts more than just them," said Leah, now 18.

Joshua McCance, a 23-year-old Navy veteran, worked for CP Integrated Services, an Oklahoma Department of Transportation

(ODOT) contractor. On March 15, 2007, he was filling potholes on a Tulsa highway when a driver swerved across lanes and onto the shoulder, hitting McCance and then his work truck.

"The accident really changed my view on how fragile life is and that in the blink of an eye something drastic can happen," said Leah's mother, Grace McCance. "Joshua's biological father died in an automobile accident before he was born, so I knew how that can affect a family, but I don't think I realized how traumatic and hard it would be to raise a child without their father due to such a horrific incident."

The motorist who struck the young father later pleaded guilty to manslaughter.

"Growing up without a dad is something I struggled with, especially when I was younger," Leah said.

"I would watch my friends grow up with father figures and I would think, 'Why can't I have that?' It caused me a lot of confusion for a while."

Instead, she grew up with her mother and a younger sister, Kyra McCance. As years went by, Leah's confusion gave way to acceptance.

"Even though it was a tragic incident, it definitely shaped me into the person I am and changed the entire course of my life," Leah said.

## BUILDING HER FUTURE

Leah is one of 14 recipients of the Roadway Worker Memorial Scholarship awarded by the American Traffic Safety Services Foundation (ATSS Foundation) for the 2023-24 academic year. The competitive scholarship program offers up to \$10,000 annually for dependents of roadway workers killed or permanently disabled in work zone incidents. Students who demonstrate a strong commitment to volunteerism are eligible to apply for an additional \$1,000, given in honor of Chuck Bailey, a roadway safety member who died in 2002.

McCance said the scholarship "alleviated some of the stress that was on us about finances and gave Leah the ability to pursue her education and be able to step out on her own."

Leah said she's grateful for how the scholarship will benefit her future.

"I am just super thankful," she said. "It's going to help me not be in debt and start my career out well."

Leah hopes to spend that career at the head of a classroom. She's working toward a degree in early education.

Joshua and Grace McCance were friends for years before they became a couple and wed in 2003. He was 23 when he was killed in a work zone incident.

"I've always just loved being around kids and interacting with them," said Leah, who started babysitting when she was 12. "When I was in the fourth grade, I had this teacher, Mrs. Stanley, and she was by far the best teacher I ever had. She made me want to be a teacher."

Leah wrote in her scholarship essay: "I plan to ... become an elementary school teacher and further my music career. This is important to me so I can better myself and hopefully make a difference in young children's lives, influencing them to grow into a person they want to become."

### MARCHING ON

Music is another of Leah's passions.

She plays the trumpet and was a member of her school's band program for seven years. She also spent a season as a drum major and was part of the indoor percussion ensemble, she said.

"I love performing music," Leah said. "I really love being part of such a big group that comes together."

She recalled a standout moment during her marching band career. In 2021, the Pride of Broken Arrow won the Bands of America Grand National Championships. The group's score of 98.25 broke the record for the highest ever in the competition.

"The instrumental music programs at Broken Arrow Public Schools provide students with opportunities to better themselves and prepare for life's lessons," wrote Broken Arrow Director of Bands Darrin Davis in a letter to the Foundation. "Leah is a prime example of what we expect every student to aspire to be."

Leah is continuing her music education at Oklahoma Baptist University. Her previous experiences prepared her well.



"The [band] schedule here is not as hard as the one at Broken Arrow," she said.

### A FATHER'S LEGACY

Joshua McCance's unexpected death on Broken Arrow Expressway robbed Leah of time to create memories with him, but she has learned a lot about her father.

He was a student-athlete who entered the Navy in 2002, shortly after he graduated high school. According to his obituary, he served a four-year term as an aviation warfare specialist and flew missions over Iraq. His rank was petty officer, 3rd class.

"I've heard he was very funny and always cracking jokes and was very sarcastic," Leah said. "He was a kind person ... and very loyal."

He was persistent, too.


"He met my mom when they were 12 years old," Leah said. "He was in love with her from the beginning."

Leah's mother said she and Joshua McCance were best friends, but he always insisted they would get married. She was

unconvinced, but he would buy her gifts and win her prizes at the local fair anyway. He even hung out at her house while she got ready for dates with other people.

It wasn't until he was home on leave from the military in 2003 that Grace McCance started thinking maybe they were destined for marriage. Soon, they started "officially talking," and they wed in December of that year.

Leah believes she inherited some of her father's personality traits.

"I'm a very sarcastic person and I tend to make a lot of jokes," Leah said. "I definitely got the joking and sense of humor from him." 

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Left: Leah McCance visits the gravesite of her father, Joshua McCance, at about age 10. Leah said her dad loved telling jokes and was a kind, loyal person..

Right: Leah McCance graduated from Broken Arrow High School in 2023 and is now working toward a degree in elementary education at Oklahoma Baptist University.