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Note: Rodney Carr mentioned in the article is a Communities In Schools Site Coordinator-Education and Career Coach at Vance High School.

Vance High senior finds solace in baseball after personal loss

by Joe Habina, Correspondent for *The Charlotte Observer*

The short prayer Vance senior Zakiel Morla says to himself every time he steps to the plate is much more meaningful than a plea for a successful at-bat.

Likewise, whenever he gets a base hit, the gesture he makes to the sky is more than a show of gratitude.

Both displays are dedicated toward Morla's mother, Maria Cordero, who died April 17, 2014.

Baseball already was deeply rooted in Providence, R.I., native Morla, but when he returned to Charlotte after his mother's funeral near the end of last season, the sport and his teammates provided comfort he needed.



Now in his final season with the Cougars, Morla, who goes by "Zack," continues to find solace in the sport and hopes to land a college scholarship.

"His attitude is phenomenal," said second-year head coach Rodney Carr. "I've never seen a kid's attitude, win or lose, like that. We're not a great baseball school. He competes to the last play."

Although Morla lives with his aunt and cousin, Carr and his son Jirod, a sophomore first baseman on the team, have become a surrogate family.

Carr also is a career counselor at Vance and has become an important mentor to Morla.

Maria Cordero and Morla's father met in the Dominican Republic, and Cordero was pregnant with Morla when she moved to the U.S.

Morla's father has never been to the U.S., and Morla has never met him.

At the end of his sophomore year, Morla suggested to his mother that he move to Charlotte to live with his aunt so that he could escape the tough neighborhood they lived in, and so that his chances of getting recruited would improve.

Maria had been diagnosed with breast cancer in November 2011. She continued to take radiation and chemotherapy into his sophomore year, and Morla says his mother's cancer was in remission when he moved to Charlotte.

Vance's baseball season already was underway when Morla transferred, and he spent his sophomore year on the junior varsity. Recognizing they shared a similar passion for baseball, Carr took him under his wing.

Morla, a strapping 6-foot-2, 195-pounder who plays the middle infield, pitches and catches, became a summer AAU teammate of Jirod Carr. Rodney Carr helped sponsor Morla at a couple summer baseball camps at N.C. Central University.

“Coach Carr is like a father to me,” said Morla. “I talk to him at his office every morning. I speak to him at lunch time. He tells me steps I need to take to get into college.”

During his junior year, Morla became the starting centerfielder and a leader on the Cougars’ varsity team. For the season, he and Jirod tied for the team lead with a .350 batting average.

In early April, Morla took a phone call from his mother after a Vance away game. Maria, who was under the care of Morla’s sister, informed her son that her cancer had returned but that she didn’t want to frighten him with the news.

When he arrived home that night, the news that Morla’s aunt, Sardy, shared with him was even more grave; doctors gave Maria just a couple of weeks to live.

Morla traveled to Providence during spring break, and his mother died during his visit.

“The whole time, my teammates texted me, saying they were thinking about me and playing for me,” said Morla. “They were encouraging me to get better and to stay positive and to keep my head up.

“When I came back (to Charlotte), it was important for me to keep playing baseball and to be with my teammates. They supported me through that time.”

With Rodney Carr’s guidance, Morla has thrived on the baseball field and in the classroom. When Carr drives Jirod to games and practices or to the batting cage, Morla also is there.

Morla has improved his GPA from a 2.2 his first semester at Vance to a 2.9 as he approaches graduation. Carr has helped him complete college applications, and Morla already has been accepted to N.C. Central, N.C. A&T State University and UNC Pembroke.

Morla said that if he doesn’t receive a scholarship to play baseball in college, he may join the military so he can receive financial assistance to attend college one day. He aspires to study criminal justice.

“One thing about Zack, he’s never going to have a bad attitude,” said Jirod Carr. “He always has his head up... and encourages you to do better. What he went through with his mom, he came back with a positive attitude telling people it’s going to be OK.

“You have to work hard, and everything is going to fall in place.”

Link to story on Observer’s website:

<http://www.charlotteobserver.com/sports/high-school/article16292732.html#storylink=cpy>