

- The W&M News
 - [Ideation](#)
-

Media Resources

- Press Releases
 - Multimedia
 - Her Majesty's Visit
 - Charter Day
 - University Relations staff
 - [Visiting campus](#)
-
- [College calendar](#)

[W & M HOME](#)

Navigate the WM Web

Teammate, student, friend: College remembers Gutenberg

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Members of the fencing club placed

their weapons on the floor in tribute to Ben Gutenberg. By Stephen Salpukas.

Smart, athletic, generous, handsome, funny, irreverent, competitive, loving and loyal. A brother, son, teacher, student and friend. In his 18 years, Ben Gutenberg was all of these things and more, family and friends said Thursday.

The College of William and Mary freshman, who died Nov. 27 from injuries sustained in a car accident earlier this month, was remembered this morning during a memorial service at the Wren Chapel. More than 100 people from the College community and beyond filled the chapel.

At the ceremony, Gutenberg was described as a believer in heroes “who used their extraordinary talents to shape the world in which they lived in for the better, as Ben would have done,” said William and Mary President Gene R. Nichol. “This much we know, which makes this loss the harder.”

Gutenberg, a member of the College’s fencing team, was traveling with the team to a competition in Pennsylvania Nov. 10 when the accident occurred near Richmond. Beloved long-time fencing coach Pete S. Conomikes was killed in the accident, and three students, including Gutenberg, were injured. Since the accident, the two other members of the fencing club were treated and released from the Virginia Commonwealth University Medical Center, but Gutenberg remained hospitalized there in critical condition. He passed away on Tuesday.

Gutenberg’s father, Jeff, spoke at the service and thanked the fencing team and others at the College for their support in the weeks following the accident. He said the family was greatly uplifted by the outpouring of support.

Jeff said that when his son, a graduate of McQuaid Jesuit High School in Rochester, New York, decided to go to William and Mary, they knew what to expect in terms of academics, but didn’t know what the other students would be like.

“We’ve learned the answer to that question during the last 20 days, and what a great impression they have made on us,” he said. “Our admiration began from the first moments we got to the hospital late on that Saturday night and found a large number of the teammates there.”

In the days and weeks that followed, classmates, teammates, members of the College staff and administration all visited the hospital and offered whatever support they could to the family.

“They sent cards, made postings on Facebook, some even brought parents and siblings – in short they did everything they could to show their friendship and concern,” said Jeff.

“As we move forward and try to live happy and fulfilling lives without Ben, we will have comfort in knowing how happy he was here at William and Mary,” Jeff said.

During the memorial, members of the fencing team raised their weapons in a final salute to Gutenberg. Many of the teammates wore black armbands bearing the initials of their coach and teammate.

Tom Hennig, a senior and one of the team's co-captains, spoke about Gutenberg's ability as both a teacher in fencing and as a student of the sport. In a few short months at the College, Gutenberg had made a strong impression on his teammates.

"Ben was good enough to understand everything about fencing but at the same time he was humble enough and driven enough to work on whatever technique he needed to improve," said Hennig.

Hennig also noted Gutenberg's humor and his quality of character.

"What struck me, and I think a lot of the other guys on the team, was realizing how much of a genuinely nice person Ben was," said Hennig.

He recalled how one night, a friend was over cooking dinner for a group when the spaghetti began to burn. Gutenberg stepped in and saved the meal. When Hennig spoke to Gutenberg later to thank him for saving the dinner, he received an unexpected reply.

"He looked at me and said, 'I really didn't care about the spaghetti, I just really didn't want the other guy to be made fun of.' I think that really epitomizes Ben," he said. Hennig said the team will greatly miss their teammate, teacher, student and friend.

"It was an honor to know Ben Gutenberg," he said.

Nichol praised the fencing team for their resilience, character and commitment to one another during the weeks following the accident.

"Your burden now is a heavy one. It will remain so. But also we should resolve that we now compete and strive and excel as focused fencers and beyond under Ben's banner," said Nichol.

At the end the memorial service, organ donation pins depicting a heart and green ribbon were provided for attendees to take with them. In a final act that showed the kind of caring he was known for, Gutenberg donated his organs.

As he closed his remarks, Nichol challenged those at the memorial to honor the life of "one unfairly taken."

"To make, as Ben would, a difference in the quality of our shared and too often precarious lives. To hold fast to life itself, with each precious moment in it. To hold fast to our possibilities. To hold fast to one another. To the promise of this place and the promise of Ben's joy, of his greatness, of his power," he said. "That challenge, that necessity that obligation will remain our own. Ben Gutenberg would have us embrace it. We can do no other."