

Central Florida Youth of the Year finds path out of tragedy



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Abigaëlle Caillot looks over a sea of expectant faces and takes a deep breath. “I can vividly remember the sounds of metal clashing together,” she says. “On Aug. 19, 2011, I lost the most important man in my life — my father.”

Then she stops, her voice breaking, and a long silence falls over the room. The 18-year-old Dr. Phillips High School senior has just been named the 2019 Youth of the Year by the Boys & Girls Clubs of Central Florida, which is celebrating on this February night at the Orlando Museum of Art. After the hors d'oeuvres and musical entertainment and various speeches, Caillot is left standing in the spotlight to tell the story she hates to tell.

“I don’t really cry,” she says later. “When I hear about other people and what they’ve been through, I think: ‘My story isn’t as big as your story. ... I’m OK. I’m not a victim. I don’t see myself that way, and I don’t want you to see me that way either.’”

The daughter of Haitian immigrants, Caillot speaks English, Creole and French. In the visual arts magnet program at Dr. Phillips, she has a 4.4 grade-point average and is dual-enrolled at Valencia College, where she spends four days a week. She’s a member of Dr. Phillips’ competitive cheerleading squad, which just ranked second in the state. And she’s both a club member and volunteer at the Levy Hughes Branch Boys & Girls Club in Parramore — a place, she says, that gave her fatherly role models when her own was taken.

It happened on a Friday morning. Caillot’s father, a 43-year-old taxi driver, was at the wheel of his Toyota Corolla, taking the kids to school. Beside him was Caillot’s 11-year-old cousin, Gaeton. Caillot, 10 at the time, sat in the back, sandwiched between two other young cousins.

The car was heading north on Rio Grande Avenue. The official report says Gabriel Caillot “lost control” and crossed into the southbound lanes, into the path of an SUV. His daughter has no memory of the details, but from conversations with family, she thinks her father made a sudden U-turn, apparently having forgotten something.

Minutes earlier, in the last conversation she remembers, he had told her he loved her.

“He and my mom got in an argument, and then I was just mad at, like, how things played out,” Caillot says. “So then he just told me he loved me in the car. ... And to this day, I regret not saying anything because I didn't know that was going to be, like, our last time together. I thought we would have more.”

Then there was the sound of metal against metal.

Gabriel Caillot and 11-year-old Gaeton were pronounced dead at the scene. Abigaëlle and her two other cousins had to be cut out of the car, and she would spend the next several weeks in the hospital. She broke her femur, her knee, her ankle and several ribs. She had a lacerated liver.

She drifted in and out of consciousness. Unable to walk and still in serious condition, she was allowed to leave only to attend a portion of the funeral.

But in her father's casket, she placed a note: *I wish I would have said I love you*, she wrote.

In therapy, she learned to walk again. Her mother, a nurse, took a second job to support Abigaëlle and her younger brother — as well as cover the ballooning medical bills.

Abigaëlle withdrew.

“She was always extremely smart,” says Tasha Robinson-Banks, her club's senior service director. “But she was reserved. I think she just had to find her way back, and at the club she found that safe place. Here, you know, there may be days where you feel like crying, and that's OK. You don't have to be anything other than what you are.”

Caillot joined SMART Girls — for Skills Mastery And Resilience Training — a club program with peers who share their own challenges and learn to overcome them.

The club also encouraged her to pursue her love of art, and through her church, Caillot began selling her drawings to raise money for an orphanage in Haiti. So far, she has donated more than \$1,000.

Now, her immediate concern is college. The Youth of the Year honor comes with a \$5,000 scholarship from the Kiwanis Club of Orlando and the chance to compete for more scholarships at the state, regional and national level. She wasn't accepted at Florida State, her first choice, because although her grades are high, her standardized test scores are not. She will retake the SAT in a couple of weeks and hopes to be accepted at Howard University. Her goal is to become a nurse practitioner, perhaps working in a developing country.

It's something her father would have embraced. “I always feel like he's watching over me,” she says.

She feels him in that moment in the spotlight at the Orlando Museum of Art, even when the words stick in her throat. After the long silence, a voice in the crowd yells out: “You got this!” And people begin to applaud.

Caillot starts to speak again. “Through this program, I've learned that everybody has their own demons, and we have to be there to support one another,” she says.