

Posted: 12:30 a.m. Thursday, Aug. 23, 2012

Stuart foundation created to help children with behavior problems

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Special to The Palm Beach Post

STUART — By no account was Robert "Bart" Fletcher the child every parent dreamed of raising.

Fletcher was combative and angry. He was prone to fits of rage. His parents locked the door to their bedroom when they slept at night because they didn't know what was going through his mind.

His mother, Ginny Luther, worked with special needs children during the day and couldn't take coming home to something worse than she faced at work. She researched different parenting methods, hoping to find some help in an article or book that would bring Fletcher under control.

In short, Fletcher was not the type of child on track to have a non-profit foundation named after him. Certainly not one that focused on "healing the hearts of hurting children."

But, thanks to a combination of Luther striking the right chord with a parenting technique called Conscious Discipline and Fletcher meeting the right person in band director Al Hager at Stuart Middle School, things began to change.

Anger turned to creativity. Fits of rage changed to a drive to do better, as evidenced by a 4.0 GPA at the University of Florida and a year abroad in which he became fluent in Portuguese. Robert Fletcher turned into a Lieutenant Robert Fletcher of the United States Army Reserves. He became a platoon and tank commander who finished the tour of duty for a fallen comrade, spending half a year in the Middle East.

While on duty at Fort Hood, Texas, in September 2008, Fletcher was asked to check on Spec. Jody Wirawand, who was facing a discharge for some missing equipment. When Fletcher approached Wirawand at his apartment, Wirawand shot Fletcher, fired on police and then turned the gun on himself.

8/25/12

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"When you have the devastation of something like that, you either let it destroy you or define you and find some purpose in it all," said Jack Luther, Fletcher's stepfather. "We knew we could bring attention to certain things, use it as a catalyst to fuel us to make a difference in the world. One of those things was the foundation in his memory."

The Lt. Robert Fletcher Memorial Foundation was created in 2010. Ginny and Jack Luther use it to highlight and help what they refer to as "hurting children." Children who may possess behavioral issues. Or children who need a different outlook on life.

If there's one thing the Luthers understand, it's how a life can be changed simply making the right change, no matter how small. They also know what happens when that change isn't made.

"When you have the same amount of compassion and understanding and caring for the man who gunned down your son as you do for your own son, there's something crazy going on. We created this foundation for the killer just as much as we did for our own son. We want to get to the other Jody Wirawands that are out there," Luther said. "Our son was a hurting child. The man who killed our son was the mirror image of Bart, except he never got the help."

The Lt. Robert Fletcher Memorial Foundation has partnered with grief counseling camps, weekend and summer camp retreats, Children & Families Inc., Hug-a-Hero Foundation, and the Foundation for Achieving Character and Educational Success. The foundation also made one donation that meant just a little bit more to the Luther family.

One of the differences Hager made on Fletcher's life was the introduction of the saxophone. The troubled child took to it and made it a passion. He even played in a traveling jazz band when he graduated high school.

After his death, his parents found the expensive saxophone he had saved up to buy and traded it in at a local music shop, receiving a discount on two barely used saxophones. They then parlayed that two-for-one deal into a donation to the Stuart Middle School band, which was in need of instruments.

The presentation was made at the band's biggest performance of the year...hours after Jack Luther got off the operating table.

"We were more than happy to provide those through the foundation. We thought it was very appropriate to buy saxes for the band, considering Bart's history," Jack Luther said. "The kids gave us a roaring standing ovation. I had just had surgery on my knee that day, but I got up there and spoke, crutches and all. I knew I had to be there to watch what happened that day."

The Lt. Robert Fletcher Memorial Foundation

What: A nonprofit foundation formed in the memory of Robert Fletcher, a Martin County High graduate, who was killed in 2008 while on duty at Fort Hood, Texas. Fletcher's mother and stepfather, Ginny and Jack Luther, began the foundation as a way to raise awareness and help children who have behavioral disorders.

Partnerships: The foundation has partnered with grief counseling camps, weekend and summer camp retreats, Children & Families Inc., Hug-a-Hero Foundation, the Foundation for Achieving Character and Educational Success and the Stuart Middle School band.

Info: Go to www.bartsbluestar.org