

His crowning accomplishment



Piazza family photo

Sam Piazza, a senior at Gaither High, has things well in hand at the homecoming dance Saturday. You make a lot of friends when you're in ROTC, a basketball team manager and head of the school's Best Buddies Club.

Teen with Down syndrome gets royal treatment at Gaither High.

By **SHERRI ACKERMAN**
sackerman@tampatrib.com

TAMPA • The cafeteria went dark during Gaither High School's homecoming dance as it came time to crown the king and the queen.

Standing center stage was Sam Piazza, a member of the senior homecoming court, wearing a tuxedo and shiny pink tie. At 19, Sam is older than most of his classmates, and he knows he's different in other ways, too.

He was nervous. His escort, 17-year-old Hannah Poole, reminded him to smile. If only he could remember to breathe.

Gaither has become his second home. It's where students hug one another and say, "I love you."

It's where Sam became a best friend, a boyfriend and a leader.

He joined the school's Best Buddies Club four years ago, making sure everyone had a friend. Sam is director now.

For the past three years, he has served as the Cowboys' basketball team



Staff photo by MAURICE CAPOBIANCO

"It's great to have friends."

SAM PIAZZA, Gaither High student with Down syndrome, on his life at the school



Piazza family photo

See **SAM PIAZZA**, Page 7 • Sam hits the dance floor with Sarah Wood, Gaither's homecoming queen.

Credit: Tampa Bay Times/ZUMA Press

SAM PIAZZA

Continued From Page 1

manager. Sam tried out for the junior varsity team a few years ago. He cried when he wasn't picked.

And he learned not everyone makes the team.

Sam joined ROTC this year. He wants to be a hero. The uniform reminded him of the one his big brother, Luke, wore as a Marine.

He signed up for an early childhood education program at Gaither to see whether he would like working with kids. He thought it would make him a better uncle to his niece.

Next year, Sam hopes to attend a special program at the University of South Florida. Eventually, he wants to become a chef and open a restaurant with Luke called Two Brothers Chill Grill. Their signature dish will be surf and turf.

One day, Sam plans to travel to New York, Italy and Ireland — for the food and to learn more about his heritage.

Lately, he's had his sights set on homecoming king.

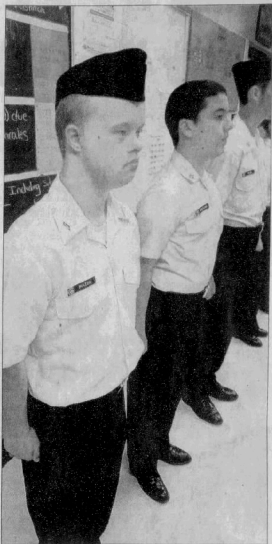
His mother, Ruth, has been supportive but cautious of the plan. Gaither is a big school with about 1,500 students. Sam attends classes with everyone else, mainstream classes, but Ruth still wants to protect him.

Sam just wants to chase his dreams. After he was nominated for homecoming court, he prepared a speech for his classmates.

"It is an honor to be ... part of a community that has been so willing to look at everyone as a unique individual with different talents," he wrote.

He wished his Class of 2010 good luck. It crowned him king Saturday.

As the lights rose, everyone in the cafeteria cheered and clapped.



Staff photo by MAURICE CAPOBIANCO

Sam Piazza, left, wears a lot of hats at Gaither High. One is that of ROTC cadet. As his friend Hannah Poole says, "You really can do anything you set your mind to."

"I cried," Sam admitted a few days later.

"He deserved it," said fellow court member Dylan Hatchcock.

Then Sam and his queen, Sarah Wood, danced to Graham Colton's "Best Days."

"Everything I've ever done, I'd give it all to everyone for one more day," the song went.

"I knew he would win," Sarah said.

It made everyone stop and think.

"You really can do anything you set your mind to," Hannah said.

"It just blew us away,"

Sam's mother said.

And it gave them hope.

Maybe Sam, who has Down syndrome, a congenital condition caused by a chromosomal disorder, will have more than just family to count on in the future.

"It's great to have friends," he said, hugging Hannah at school Wednesday.

"I love you, Sam," she said.

Reporter Sherri Ackerman can be reached at (813) 259-7144.

Credit: Tampa Bay Times/ZUMA Press