

*...upon reading the message, Jonathan began to wail as tears welled up in his eyes and streamed effortlessly down his face. My heart sank as I watched confused and helplessly in silence. Eventually, he muttered, "Mr. Cooper got shot while driving home," as he showed me his phone. Upon hearing those words and reading the email, my very core was smothered with a profound, suffocating heaviness. I sat there and stared blankly into the darkness... Why do bad things happen to good people?...*



Currently, fourteen students at this university share something in common, or rather, *someone* special. Jonathan, the other twelve students, and I are but a small fraction of the product of a working miracle that began in August of 2007 at the start of the Blue Legion Band program. The founder of said program is the same individual that received the *Dr. William P. Foster Community Development Award* at the Midwest Clinic in Chicago this past December for “literally rescu[ing] hundreds of students from perilous environments throughout his career.” He is also the same educator whose impact has encouraged many first-generation college students to pursue a higher education. Those individuals would soon see a difference in their opportunities, be the difference in their families, and positively impact their communities; the fourteen of us are witnesses— in real-time— of this miracle. He accomplished this by making the band hall a home and a safe haven, becoming a surrogate parent when necessary, encouraging us to find our worth, convincing us that our lives had meaning, and pushing us to improve constantly and consistently.

As grim as the circumstances were on February 1st, 2021 for Mr. Cooper, he survived, and in fact, ten days later— with a bullet lodged just a couple of centimeters from his heart— he was back in front of the band demonstrating his tenacity, continuing his craft, and guiding the next generation of successful individuals. In the brief time that I have known him, Mr. Cooper has also placed students in jobs, found affordable cars and instruments for them, paid for their rent, filled up their gas tanks, and has advocated ceaselessly for them— finding them sponsors and money, so that they could make a future for themselves. This mentor, philanthropist,



counselor, father-figure, and former Bearkat alum is a hero and champion for all who know him and an example for others to follow. If there is anyone who truly lives up to our university's motto, "the measure of a life is its service," it is Mr. Trent Cooper, now a retiree. Even in his recent retirement, he has not faltered, and every chance that he gets to help, he does so with love and humility. My hope is that— in time and after I prove myself— he will pass the baton on to me so that I can continue his work and impact students like Jonathan and me who come from low, socio-economic backgrounds and who are striving to earn a living for their families.