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Aggies grant wish to dying father in Austin

By Mary Ann Roser

As a crowd gathered in the driveway of a Circle C home under a brilliant, windswept sky Tuesday afternoon, an unusual ceremony got underway, fulfilling a father's dying wish.

Jim Brewer, who at 57 is nearing the end of his struggle with pancreatic cancer, watched his daughter graduate from Texas A&M University — his alma mater and now hers. Because doctors said Jim's time is short, Texas A&M brought the ceremony to his home as dozens of relatives, neighbors and friends looked on, many wearing Aggie maroon.

"One of the last things on my bucket list was to see my daughter graduate, but I didn't think I was going to make it," Jim said softly just before the ceremony. "Just seeing her get her degree ..."

Brewer's voice trailed off as he teared up and sat in a wheelchair, clutching a maroon blanket to his chest. Then he turned and greeted yet another well-wisher, including some fellow members of the A&M Corps of Cadets with whom he had served. Some he hadn't seen in 15 years, he said, adding, "I feel like Tom Sawyer hanging out in the rafters."

The ceremony started at 1:30 p.m. sharp as Texas A&M Associate Dean John Hurtado, wearing a black robe with a purple sash, stood at a lectern borrowed from Clayton Elementary School, where Brewer's wife, Lisa, teaches second grade. Lisa Brewer knelt beside his wheelchair and held his hand as their two sons, Nick, 26, and Mike, 27, stood behind them.

"When I heard about this opportunity, I jumped at the chance," Hurtado told the crowd. He brought a flag called a gonfalon that represents the college of engineering and explained the symbols to the crowd. Hurtado, an aerospace engineering professor, taught Jim's daughter, Jenny, who is 23 and slated to receive a bachelor's degree in that subject on May 12.

Hurtado's voice broke when he turned his attention to Jenny and spoke of her accomplishments and the Aggie values she embodies. Jim Brewer looked on, alternately wiping tears and smiling at Jenny as she stood beside Hurtado in a cap and gown. When Hurtado instructed Jenny to turn around her class ring so the year was pointing outward, Jim touched his own ring, Class of 1980, and gave her a thumbs-up.

Jim Brewer is a civil engineering graduate and worked as a senior project manager at Doucet & Associates. Some of his colleagues were at the ceremony and were among those applauding when Hurtado said: "Jenny, you are now and forever an Aggie. ... Congratulations, and gig 'em."

Then, Jim, Lisa, Nick and Mike joined Jenny and faced their family, friends and colleagues as they all sang "The Spirit of Aggieland," a familiar tune at A&M sports events.

"I think it's just amazing everyone showed up," Jenny said afterward. "I just want to thank Texas A&M. The Aggies are awesome."

The ceremony was Nick's idea. He lives and works in Fayetteville, Ark., but recently came home to be with his family. "The one thing my dad kept saying is he was hoping he would live long enough to see Jenny graduate."

Just a week ago, Nick emailed a Texas A&M official asking about the possibility of a home graduation ceremony. Nick knew Daniel Pugh, the vice president for student affairs, when Pugh was an official at the University of Arkansas, Nick's alma mater. Pugh followed through, and Nick said he wasn't really surprised.

"With the experience I've had with Texas A&M before and knowing the kind of people they are, I was optimistic," he said. "But to get the response from the people I got it from was pretty cool."

Jim didn't find out until yesterday.

"We were trying to keep it a surprise, but he (Jim) was having a rough morning yesterday, so we let him know yesterday," Nick said, adding that his mom and sister were in the room. All four of them shed tears, Nick said.

"This is beyond my expectations," Jim said, just before his family took him inside and invited their guests in for chocolate cake.