

20-year-old North Carolina college student dies from COVID-19

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Tyler Gilreath, a 20-year-old student from the University of North Carolina-Wilmington (UNCW), died of complications from COVID-19 on September 27, in yet another tragic exposure of the myth that young people are left unscathed by the deadly virus.

Gilreath's mother, Tamara Demello, repeatedly encouraged her son to get vaccinated over the summer, but he insisted that he was young, healthy, and did not have any pre-existing conditions, and therefore would be fine without vaccination. Eventually, Gilreath agreed to get vaccinated once he reached UNCW, as a present for his mother's 60th birthday.

But he never got a chance. Gilreath tested positive for COVID-19 on August 20, two days after moving into his dorm at the university, his mother told the *News and Observer*. For three weeks, Gilreath was "extremely sick," running a 102-degree fever, vomiting, and experiencing other major symptoms. By September 7, Gilreath tested negative for the coronavirus, and his fever and other symptoms had mostly abated. However, he still suffered from headaches and lethargy.

After going to the doctor's office, Gilreath discovered that he had a sinus infection. In the days before he could get a prescription for antibiotics filled, the infection had combined with a staph infection and started to move toward his brain, Demello said.

On the night of September 20, Gilreath told his mother he was feeling significant weakness on the right side of his body, as if he was losing control of it. His roommates took him to the emergency room around 10 p.m. and by 1:30 a.m. surgeons had to create an opening in his skull to drain excess fluid and reduce swelling in his brain. Demello drove down to Wilmington, and Gilreath's father drove from Ohio. Doctors told them the sinus infection had gone to their

son's brain, and had ruptured.

Over the course of the week, Gilreath's condition got worse, as he lost brain function. His mother said he briefly regained consciousness and looked her in the eyes while squeezing her hand, acknowledging that he knew she was there. But the swelling in his brain continued to worsen. After one more operation, at around 3 a.m. on Sept. 25, doctors informed Gilreath's parents that he likely would not survive. A CAT scan revealed there was no blood flow to his brain and the damage was irreversible.

Doctors took Gilreath off life support Tuesday morning. According to his family, his heart, liver, pancreas and kidneys were able to be saved and donated to others.

On the night of Sept. 26, after it was certain her son was not going to survive, Demello wrote a goodbye on Facebook. "He will live on in my heart and through those recipients. I know he is with God, but the hole in my life he leaves will never go away. I love you, Son. Rest in peace," she wrote.

Gilreath grew up in Apex, North Carolina and attended Wake STEM Early College High School, where he completed a year of college courses at North Carolina State University. He spent his freshman year of college at Virginia Tech, before the coronavirus forced campuses to close. He transferred to UNCW this fall, to study computer science. Before he got sick, Demello described her son as healthy and vibrant. He loved to wakeboard, water ski, and snow ski.

"This is just such a devastating shock. It'll just leave such a hole in our heart forever that can never be filled," Demello told WECT on Monday. "If these kids could just realize not only what this could do to them, but how devastating it is to everybody around them. I'm just begging them to please go get their shots."

Since the beginning of the academic year at UNCW, 805 students, 37 faculty and one contractor have tested positive for COVID-19. Gilreath's infection came at the beginning of a surge of cases in the last week of August, with nearly 100 students testing positive every day for four days in a row.

College campuses across the country have recklessly reopened in the last two months, resulting—despite the often-high rates of vaccination—in tens of thousands of infections, and needless deaths among students, faculty and staff. Almost every major campus has seen a significant outbreak of COVID-19. A significant share of those who fall ill will have long term symptoms and develop Long Covid.

Twenty-year-old Texas A&M University student Kirstyn Katherine Ahuero died from COVID-19 on September 8, triggering protests by students on campus and on social media to demand stricter restrictions or online courses to limit the spread of the coronavirus.

In the interest of profits from concessions and advertisement, tens of thousands of fans have been encouraged to pack into college football stadiums and other sports arenas without any serious restrictions. Meanwhile, professors and students who have protested have been dismissed or ignored by university administrators.

Students and workers must take up the demand for the eradication of COVID-19 to protect lives and finally put an end to a pandemic which has killed more than 700,000 people in the United States and 4.7 million globally. This will require the closure of schools and non-essential businesses, combined with full compensation for those who remain at home, until the spread of COVID-19 is stopped and can be eliminated through the deployment of an effective testing, contact tracing and quarantine program in coordination with a truly global vaccination initiative.



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