

Julio Fuentes continues on his amazing road to recovery

10/04/19



Mark Mertel '67 was at the Community Table in Powell Campus Center on Saturday, Sept. 28, enjoying lunch and conversation with some fellow Alfred University alumni, students and President Mark Zupan. Unbeknownst to Mertel, one lunch guest who had not yet arrived, Julio Fuentes, was waiting just outside with a surprise for the gathered group.

Mertel is a key member of "Team Julio" and philanthropic supporter of Fuentes's efforts to recover from a severe spinal injury he suffered during a football game in Alfred in 2006, which left him paralyzed. Team Julio is a group of alumni, friends, faculty and staff from Alfred University helping Fuentes not only recover from his injuries, but to also realize his dream of completing his studies at Alfred University.

On Saturday at the Community Table, Fuentes was to join Mertel and others for lunch, at which time Mertel, also a football player during his time at Alfred, would present Julio with one of the special black jerseys the Saxons wore for that day's home game against the University of Rochester. Little did Mertel know, but Julio had obtained a jersey with Mertel's number 75 and planned to present it to him at the lunch.

The greatest part of the surprise, though, was when Fuentes – accompanied by his fiancé, Heather, and Alfred University head football coach Bob Rankl – walked into the Community Table dining area to greet Mertel and present him with the jersey. The smiles on both Fuentes's and Mertel's faces were a mile wide.

Fuentes has been undergoing physical rehabilitation since shortly after his injury. The results thus far have been nothing short of amazing. Three years ago, at the football team's home opener at Yunevich Stadium, he sat in his wheelchair at midfield and served as an honorary team captain for the opening coin toss. On the way back to the sideline he stopped, was helped out of his wheelchair, and with the aid of a walker and two rehabilitation specialists holding his arms, took the remaining steps from the field.

Saturday showed how far Fuentes has come in the three years since. He didn't need a walker, or rehabilitation professionals to guide him. With a determined look on his face, at times betraying the hint of a smile, he walked

through the door of the Community Table and made his way across the floor to the table. There, he received his jersey from Mertel, then returned the favor.

Fuentes is working toward completing his Alfred University degree. In 2016, the University's Board of Trustees voted to provide him a full scholarship and alumni like Mertel have made possible videoconferencing and other equipment needed for Fuentes to pursue much of his studies remotely. His major is counseling psychology, with a life goal of helping others who undergo traumatic injuries such as the one he has had to deal with.

In photo above, last Saturday at the Community Table dining area, from left: Bob Rankl, Alfred University head football coach; Mark Mertel '67, member of Team Julio; Julio Fuentes; and Mark Zupan, Alfred University president.