

## Town turns tables on school prank

*West Branch, Mich.* — High school student Whitney Kropp was shocked earlier this month when she was named to the homecoming court.

Her happy surprise turned to humiliation when she learned the reason. The students thought it would be funny if the popularity contest was won by someone who was unpopular.

Kids pointed at her in the hallways and laughed. The boy who was picked with her withdrew.

Students told her that, in case she was wondering why the boy had dropped out, he was uncomfortable being linked with her.

"I thought I wasn't worthy," said Kropp, 16. "I was this big old joke."

Her embarrassment was complete, but it didn't last long.

This tiny farm town an hour north of Saginaw quickly rallied around her.

For the homecoming dance Saturday, businesses will buy her dinner, take her photo, fix her hair and nails, and dress her in a gown, shoes and a tiara.

For the homecoming game Friday, residents will pack the football stadium so they can cheer when she is introduced at halftime.

They will be wearing her favorite color (orange) and T-shirts with messages of support. A 68-year-old grandmother offered to be her escort.

"I am in awe, overwhelmed at the amount of support," said Jamie Kline, 35, who began a Facebook support page. "I never expected it to spread as far as it has."

For Kropp, a sophomore at Ogemaw Heights High, it's been a remarkable transformation.

Before the homecoming vote, she was either ignored or scorned by classmates.

Now, when she isn't fielding yet another free offer from a business, she's being lauded by hundreds of strangers on the support page.

Cast in an unlikely role, she has embraced it. She vowed to continue representing the sophomore class, even if she has to do it alone.

It's like "Carrie" with a happy ending.

### **I'm 'a beautiful person'**

Kropp was sitting in her geometry class Sept. 13 when the results of the homecoming vote were announced over the school PA system.

Most of the students picked as class reps that day were among the most popular kids in the 800-student school. Then, out of the blue, Kropp heard her name.

She hadn't sought the position. Students were free to vote for anyone in the class.

Perhaps her selection should have made her suspicious. She is a free spirit with few friends. Her black outfits and strange hair colors don't mesh well with other kids in the rural community.

But she has a guilelessness that doesn't see the bad in people, said her mom, Bernice. Her reaction to winning was simple: She was happy.

"The first thing is softhearted," Bernice Kropp said when asked to describe her daughter. "She's just sweet. She doesn't have a mean bone in her body."

Kropp heard that other classrooms had laughed when her name was announced. And then Josh Awrey, a popular football player, quickly withdrew as the other sophomore rep.

Despite all that, she was still excited.

"In the Homecoming Court! :)" she wrote on her Facebook page. "Little nervous but this is going to be fun :D"

"Probably not with Josh though," wrote back a sophomore girl.

"He couldnt do it cause of football plus he never goes to homecoming," said Kropp.

"That's not what he told everybody," said the girl.

"what did he say?" asked Kropp.

The other girl didn't respond.

"Oh. Well it don't matter to me anyways," Kropp wrote four minutes later. "I thought it would be awkward anyways."

That night, Kropp's mom found her crying in her bedroom. She no longer wanted to do it.

As a member of the homecoming court, she and other class representatives are dressed formally as they're introduced during halftime of the football game.

Kropp's mom, sister and grandmother told her that she should show up the bullies by going to the game and having a great time. Several friends said the same thing.

Before going to bed, she decided they were right.

"Going to homecoming to show them that I'm not a joke," she wrote on Facebook. "Im a beautiful person and you shouldn't mess with me!"

The school district said it's investigating the incident.

### **'Team Whitney'**

Word of the prank quickly spread through this small town, whose water tower is a yellow smiley face.

Kropp's sister told her friends, who told their parents, who told their friends.

The Facebook support page was created, quickly drawing hundreds of messages of encouragement. The page has more likes (more than 3,500) than the town has people (2,100).

A bank account was opened for Kropp's homecoming expenses but wasn't needed. So many businesses donated services that everything was covered.

Shannon Champagne and another beauty salon worker offered their services and asked other businesses to do the same.

"It really touched me. I can't believe that kids can be so mean and ruthless," said Champagne, 28, a nail tech at Whit's End Hair Studio. "In high school, everything means everything to you. You don't realize that none of it will matter after you leave."

The issue resonated far beyond the town.

It seemed to touch a chord with anyone who had a tortuous experience in high school, which is just about anyone who ever went to high school.

Hundreds of people talked about their own experiences. A 60-year-old Wyandotte man talked about a 1966 bullying incident like it happened a day earlier.

After the uproar in town and on the Web, Awrey, the football player elected with Kropp, changed his mind and decided to remain a class rep.

He said on his Facebook page that he had never wanted to be part of homecoming.

"Im sick of everyone blaming me. I had nothing to do with this," he wrote. "I think what they (students) did is rlly rude and immature."

It's hard to eclipse high school football in a small town but, this Friday, West Branch will give it a try.

Residents will fill the concrete stands behind the high school for the homecoming game against Cadillac High. Some are grads who haven't been to a game in decades.

"We want to make this the best homecoming ever," said Rebecka Vigus, 58, a long-time resident who taught for 22 years in elementary and middle schools.

Like Vigus, many won't be there for the football.

Clutching posters and wearing T-shirts that say "Team Whitney," they will cheer heartily at halftime as a slightly awkward teenage girl in a stunning red dress circles the field in a convertible.

A pariah in the harshest social system in the world — high school — she will be the center of attention on one of its most prominent stages.

Under the Friday night lights, she will shine the brightest of all, the biggest star of the

evening.

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