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Former Valley football player Luke Keller did not experience a normal high-school career, on or off the field. Keller was diagnosed with separation-anxiety disorder. He was also suicidal.

After telling his mom, Dawn Keller, about the depression, Keller began counseling but the therapeutic treatment never cured Keller's condition.

"At the end of my junior year, I remember walking down the hallway, looking outside and thinking 'what am I even living for,'" Keller said. "I was thinking I was going to go home and take my life."

One day, with suicidal thoughts still running rampant in his mind, Keller went home from school and found a list of chores his mother had left for him. One of the chores was mowing the grass. In an attempt to clear his mind, Keller complied with his mother's request. However, while he was mowing the lawn, Keller continued to contemplate taking his own life.

Before he finished the chore, Keller decided to take a different route — as it turns out, a life-altering route.

"I said 'God if you are real. If you are what people say you are, then tell me something because today I'm going to end my life. I need you now if you're real,'" Keller said.

After a moment, Keller heard a voice and it said "I want you to follow me."

"I was in the middle of mowing my grass and was so completely overwhelmed because I truly didn't believe in God before," Keller said.

Just to make sure he was clear on the instructions, Keller again turned to God and asked him to repeat the sentiments.

"I felt like he said I want you to follow me," Keller said. "So again, I said God I feel like I heard you but would you please say it one more time just to know I'm not crazy. And I felt like he said it again. I felt like he said I want you to follow me."

After playing every football game during his junior season with suicidal thoughts and battling depression, Keller finally found the cure.

"The feeling was so real and overwhelming that I just dropped down on my knees in the middle of mowing my grass and starting balling my eyes out," Keller said. "I went through a year of counseling and it never helped. But from that day on, I've never had one more suicidal thought, one bit of separation anxiety at all."

Keller had already decided not to play football his senior year but felt like God wanted him to play, so he rejoined his teammates for one last season.

His senior campaign turned out to be a memorable one, filled with many awards and accolades, but the biggest impact was felt on the field. After every touchdown his senior year, he would get down on his knee and point up to the sky in a moment of thanks.

"God this is what you gave me," Keller said. "I'm living my life for you. Everything I do, I'm going to do for you."

However, not everyone was a fan of the celebration. Once Valley reached the postseason, Keller was warned about his touchdown celebration. If he continued to

take a knee and point to the sky, the officials would consider it an act of taunting and penalize the Indians.

"I thought if they want to keep me from glorifying God and they want to throw me out of the game, let them throw me out of the game," Keller said. "It's nothing compared to what God has done in my life."

Keller never received any warnings in Valley's first-round playoff victory. However, the second round was a different story. Keller scored an early touchdown, knelt to the ground and then made his way back to Valley's bench without any problems occurring.

On his second touchdown, Keller knelt to the ground and an official rushed toward the running back in anger and was animated with Keller about his touchdown celebration, which had become as routine as an Indian victory that season.

After a brief conversation where Keller attempted to explain his sincerity in the post-touchdown activity, the official followed Keller back to the Valley sideline and warned Indians coach Darren Crabtree about the celebration and the repercussions, which is a 15-yard personal foul penalty — two in a single contest results in an automatic ejection and according to Ohio High School Athletic Association rules, a suspension from the following game.

"I was completely devastated," Keller said. "What I play for is to glorify God. I decided I was just going to do it and if I got thrown out, then I got thrown out. I wouldn't even be here right now if it wasn't for God saving me."

At halftime, Keller received a note from his sister, which said "be patient and let God work." Keller took a step back and remembered a bible verse he had studied prior to the game.

"I was ready for this," Keller said. "I just read that Satan will attack you and I felt like Satan was attacking me, but God will separate it in seven ways."

Keller returned to the field and scored his third touchdown of the night, but this time he didn't perform his customary touchdown celebration. As Keller jogged over to the sideline with tears in his eyes, something compelled him to turn toward the Indian fans.

"I turned around and every single Valley fan was on their knees, pointing to God," Keller said. "I was so overwhelmed. I think there were seven some thousand people in the stands and every single one of them were doing it for me.

"I feel like God said, 'listen Luke, I told you Satan would come at you and I would separate it.'"

After Valley's postseason run, Keller began receiving interest from collegiate programs. However, he was being recruited as a linebacker and not running back, which was his goal.

The Morehead Eagles were the only team that recruited Keller as a running back but unlike the other institutions, they were not offering scholarships.

"I was at a point that if I was going to play in college, I wanted to play running back," Keller said. "But I said, 'God, you direct me, if you don't want me to play running back then I won't. Just direct me to whatever school you want me to go to.'"

The night before he was eligible to sign, Keller had a dream the Eagles were playing and that's all it took for him to sign on the dotted line.

“The next day I came to Morehead, even though they weren’t paying for my school,” Keller said. “I told God he was in control of my life, so I came to Morehead.”  
*Part two of the story will appear in Thursday’s edition of the Daily Times.*