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An Unforgettable Graduation Present

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The year was 1993. Michael Shannon had been a University of Dayton graduate three years. Eight-year-old Lainey Prendeville, her brothers and her cousin put a message in a bottle and dropped it into the Passaic River near Chatham, N.J.

Nearly 14 years later, and days before Lainey's own graduation from the University of Dayton, Shannon found and answered Prendeville's message in a bottle and gave her an unforgettable graduation present.

Flooding from April’s Nor’easter washed the bottle into Shannon’s parking lot at work about 15 miles away from the children’s launch point. Shannon broke the bottle to retrieve the message.

The message read: "Oct. 24, 1993. Hello, are (sic) names are: Cheryl, Lainey, Paul, and Phillip Prendeville. Cheryl is 10, Lainey is 8, Paul is 4, and Phillip is 10. We are all cousins. We are at the point where the Passaic River and the Salt Brook Meet (sic). Are (sic) address is: 38 Lisa Dr. Chatham NJ 07928 USA. WRITE SOON! From Phillip, Cheryl, Lainey and Paul Prendeville."

Shannon said various online directory searches were fruitless. So, he did a Google search on Lainey's "unique name," which listed her as a senior at the University of Dayton.

"WOW!!! I am so amazed right now! It is every child's dream to get a response from a message in a bottle!" Prendeville replied to Shannon's first e-mail. "As a kid, you think of all the amazing places that bottle will go, and dream that one day, it will actually reach someone."

Prendeville said Shannon could have easily disregarded the bottle and the note, or even thought attempts to find the Prendevilles would be useless.

He said Prendeville's reply after he found the bottle made his efforts worthwhile.

"I read it back to my wife and got too choked up to finish it," Shannon said in an e-mail to the UD student. "I guess it reminded me of doing similar types of things with my brother and sister at the same age. The wonderment of sending a bottle downstream with images of foreign destinations (your return address included U.S.A) dripped with Norman Rockwell Americana."

Besides having UD in common, both share a love for music. Prendeville will graduate with a degree in music (voice) performance at 10 a.m. Sunday, May 6, in University of Dayton Arena. Shannon plays keyboards in a rock band.

"It's very strange that this message in a bottle connected two people who share an alma mater and have a love for music," Shannon said. "But, I am glad it did. It warmed my heart and has given me a terrific story. UD is a special place that becomes a part of your DNA. It stays with you long after (you leave). The character and quality of people who attend and graduate is the same as when I enrolled there 20 years ago. To find a message from a fellow Flyer really made it special."

Prendeville added, "(At UD), we are encouraged to always go beyond our own lives and routines to take that extra step to connect with human beings and make a difference in the lives of others. Seventeen years after his graduation from the University of Dayton, the ideals instilled in him while he was here still seem to be alive and growing."

Currently, Shannon said the two do not have any plans to meet. Prendeville hopes she can meet Shannon on her next trip to New Jersey. Shannon will be returning the letter to Prendeville.

For interviews, contact Shawn Robinson at 937-229-3391.