

## **Long Name, Long Compelling Story: The Henry Debardeleben Neal Award**

**By *Acta Diurna* contributor Aubrey Sanders**

If you ever want to discover Altamont's history, all you have to do is look around. There are numerous awards, facilities, and programs named after Altamont alumni, benefactors, and others who left a positive impact on the community. The Cabaniss-Kaul Center, Patton Gym, C. Kyser Miree Ethical Leadership Center, Lily Field, or the J. Frank Rushton Cup are all named after people cemented in the school's story. And then there's the Henry Debardeleben Neal award, which was established to honor and remember the qualities of its namesake and the long-lasting impact he had on his school.

Henry Debardeleben Neal attended the Birmingham University School, which was an all-boys school before it merged with the Brooke Hill School to become Altamont. He was the son of William Mills Neal and Donie Drane DeBardeleben, and he had two sisters. As one told me, Henry D. Neal embodied the well-rounded spirit of Altamont and was "an intellectual, an avid baseball player, and a genuine friend to many." Sadly, just before Christmas in 1958, Henry passed away in a house fire. He was only eleven years old. Soon after, the school created the Henry DeBardeleben Neal Award to honor him. Recently, I had the privilege of meeting with Ms. Virginia Neal Almand, one of Henry DeBardeleben Neal's sisters, to discuss Henry's story.



### **Below is my conversation with Ms. Almand. I first asked her to describe Henry:**

He was a very, very bright little guy. In fact, when he had his I.Q. taken, [my] mother was told it was the highest I.Q. ever recorded in Jefferson County.

He loved his baseball team. He played on the fields down in Avondale Park. I mean, he really loved his team and loved baseball.

On the night of the fire, I was in a teenage group at my church, and I took Henry as my guest. I remember we had a circle and I was able to put him in the middle, introducing him to everybody. Evidently, it meant the world to him because that night my mother came to me and said, "Virginia, I'm telling your little brother good night, but he wants to speak to you." So, I went in his bedroom and he *thanked me* for taking him to the church, which was pretty atypical. Just shows how sweet and thoughtful he was.

### **Is there anything else you would like future winners of the Henry DeBardeleben Neal Award to know about Henry?**

[Henry was] a combination of intelligence and of being loved by his contemporaries. He was very caring and the idea that he asked me to come into his room to thank me for taking him to church before he went to bed that night was unusual [for someone his age]. He was just a sweet, very sweet and caring little guy. And very popular with all his peers, and just smart, and an athlete. He just had it all.

### **When was the Henry DeBardeleben Neal Award first introduced?**

Well, this is very important. You see, the award was the idea of the school because so many people made contributions [and wrote to the school] saying they wanted to do something for Henry. Usually awards, I'm told, are [created through] the family contacting the school saying, "will you create this?" [This] was the opposite. This was the school calling my mother asking for her permission to create an award in his name. It was then created shortly after that, around spring of 1959.

**Can you describe the significance of the award to your family, and how it feels to know that Henry's legacy is cemented in Altamont's history?**

It means the world to me just that his name is still present and people can know something about him. It means the world to me because otherwise his name would just be forgotten.

**The official description of the award is as follows:**

*The Henry DeBardeleben Neal Award is given annually to the outstanding eighth-grade student of The Altamont School. The award is given in memory of a student who ranked high in Birmingham University School at the time of his death in 1958. The award is in the form of a gold medal given annually at commencement. Final selection from this group is made by popular vote of the students and faculty of the entire school. The recipient is selected on the basis of honesty and integrity, school spirit, participation and leadership in school affairs, athletics, and any other activities of the student body.*