

CALEDONIA – God’s plan came full circle Wednesday for Judd Shelnut.

The journey started in seventh grade when Shelnut, who admitted all he played to that point was “a lot of X-Box,” went out for the Caledonia High School football team. There were plenty of tears in that first season and more than a few times when Shelnut cried for his mother. It wasn’t surprising that the coaches – head coach Michael Kelly included -- wondered if Shelnut was going to make it.

More than five years later, Shelnut’s transformation mirrors that of a football program and a town and leaves no doubt he *has* made it.

On Wednesday afternoon, Shelnut marked that next step in a ceremony in which family, friends and teammates celebrated his decision to play football at Tusculum University, a Division II school in Greeneville, Tennessee.

“You hate to see him go, but our football program is *better* because he played here,” Kelly said. “There will be a lot of underclassmen left over who understand what impact Judd had on our program.”

Shelnut made his initial mark on the varsity program as a freshman during the COVID-19 season. With the starting left tackle and several other players unavailable, Kelly said Shelnut had worked for the opportunity against Shannon and probably wasn’t ready for it, but he played well and made it tough on the coaches to keep him off the field.

From there, Shelnut grew – and grew – and developed into a leader in the locker room. His skills also matured and he developed the versatility to play multiple positions on the offensive line. Listed at 6-foot-3, 250 pounds, Kelly said Shelnut can play anywhere on the offensive line for the Pioneers, who play in the South Atlantic Conference (SAC).

Initially, though, Shelnut had another school – Mississippi College – in his sights. A coaching change left Shelnut, who said he was “99% of the way” to MC, back at zero overnight. He said it was difficult shifting gears and staying confident he would get an opportunity to continue his football career. About two months later, the coach who recruited Shelnut for MC landed a job at Tusculum, which re-opened the door to college football.

The bumps in the recruiting road weren’t new to Shelnut, who called himself a “momma’s boy” when he started playing football.

“I was probably the worst person on the field in the seventh grade,” Shelnut said. “I would have never played if I didn’t mature and improve. Getting bigger didn’t hurt, either.”

Shelnut said he overcame that immaturity with a lot of hard work and by telling himself “it takes more.” He said he didn’t want to be content and learned to push himself – and others – through uncomfortable situations to get better.

“You can’t be content and be great,” Shelnut said. “I am not saying I am great by any means. I am a long way from it, but I want to get there one day. Whether that’s tomorrow or 17 years from now, it’s a process.”

While Shelnut grew into a mainstay on the field for the Cavaliers, Kelly said Shelnut also embodies everything he and his assistant coaches have built at Caledonia High in the last six years. It’s a testament to that hard work that Shelnut said Caledonia has become a “football-rich town.” He said he was motivated to change the program’s trajectory and to help create a culture in which players support and help each other and celebrate “Burning the Ships” on Friday nights.

“Even on the days when he was crying for his mother and it got tough on him, he was still an influential leader around the other ones,” Kelly

said. “Judd was like a sponge and soaked it up. The things outside of football, doing things the right way, will take you a long way in life, and having a little bit of integrity. You might not get your name in the newspaper for that, but it will take you a long way.

“Judd just soaked it all up and then he let it flow through him to our other kids. If you went through the locker room, his teammates would tell you they’re going to miss more what you see from him in the locker room right now. They (will) miss the conversations and the motivation. Judd wasn’t afraid to get some of these guys by the collar and say (clapping his hands), ‘Let’s go.’ He also wasn’t afraid to ask, ‘Coach, what’s wrong? We have got to get this fixed. I will go fix it’.”

Kelly said Shelnut attended practice when he didn’t have to so he could help ninth-graders, and that he would stay 30-40 minutes after practice to show younger players the proper footwork. Kelly said that genuine care for others comes from Shelnut’s parents and is something that helped set a standard in the locker room and on the field.

“He is an influential person,” Kelly said. “He is not a follower. He is a leader. I am ready to see him play at Tusculum and transform that locker room and that campus, too.”

Shelnut hopes the example he set at Caledonia High lives on for years in the field house, town and program. From being one of the first to say “I came from one of the best Caledonia football teams there was” to earning an opportunity to play football in college is a great way to ensure Shelnut will be remembered.

“You don’t remember people who didn’t do anything,” Shelnut said. “You remember the people who left their legacy. That’s what I want to hear. It’s just my little piece, but it is something nonetheless.”