

Priscilla Frazier was expecting her son home for Thanksgiving for the first time in three years. But he called her the week before saying that doctors had cleared him to play.

"I was a little devastated," she said, "because we thought he was coming for Thanksgiving. But I had to put my feelings aside."

Besides, her son would be coming home eventually.

Pricilla Frazier loves it when her son makes it back home.

But Tommie Frazier makes it to Bradenton only two or three times a year. For four or five days after the Huskers' bowl game. Once during spring break. And once he finishes summer classes.

Last March during spring break, Frazier was home. But soon it came time for him to head back to Lincoln. He was scheduled to fly out of Tampa. But something happened on the way to Tampa — something that made his mother both fearful and thankful.

Priscilla Frazier was driving her son, along with her daughter, two granddaughters and niece, to the airport. As she approached the bridge going into the Tampa Bay area on Interstate 275, the van's right rear tire blew out and flew off the rim.

Frazier was driving 60 mph, so she tried to coast the van to lose speed. But then the body of the van started hitting the road.

So she tried to get over to the left to hit the median strip and coast down to the grassy part. But once the van hit the grass, it flipped over and landed upright.

"I remember my head hitting the roof of the van," she said, "and I said, 'Lord help us.'"

Once the van landed upright, Priscilla Frazier noticed that the passenger door was open, and Tommie wasn't in the passenger seat. He had been thrown from the van and ended up on his knees against the van.

"I am telling you, I saw my life and my kids' lives before me," Priscilla Frazier said.

Even though nobody was wearing seat belts, there were no serious injuries, and Tommie had only a few scratches to show for it.

"Some of us should have been hurt more than we were," Priscilla Frazier said. "I am just thankful and praise the Lord that He had his hand on us. We were blessed."

In Linda Kinnan's 10th-grade English class, Frazier always sat in the front row.

Kinnan, because her husband coached the varsity team at Manatee, developed a common bond with the 15-year-old Frazier.

"He was in J.V. football, and even then he was a standout," she said. "I took a special interest in him."

Frazier, meanwhile, showed a special interest in learning, Kinnan

said. He always did well on his weekly spelling tests and handed in his homework and assignments on time.

To Kinnan, he was Tommie Frazier the student. To other students, especially girls, she said, he was Tommie Frazier the star athlete.

"He was quiet, but popular with the other students," she said. "Compared to the other students, he was quiet and businesslike."

"... He was a good student because he tried hard."

And Frazier continued that trend in college. Despite not taking a redshirt year, he's on track to graduate this May with a degree in communications.

Even while he was in New York City for the Heisman Trophy presentation, Frazier had his mind on something other than winning college football's most coveted award.

After the ceremony, reporters and television cameramen from across the country surrounded Frazier. The questions flew at him. Questions about finishing second to Ohio State's Eddie George in the Heisman race. Questions about the Fiesta Bowl. Questions about the run for a second-straight national title. Frazier answered them, but he was thinking about the three finals he had to study for the next week.

And Frazier's mother couldn't be more proud of that answer. Priscilla Frazier tells her children that education always comes first, before football or anything else. And she told her children that they always would have their degrees to fall back on.

Frazier has taken his mother's advice to heart. With the recent success of former Colorado quarterback Kordell Stewart with the Pittsburgh Steelers, Frazier's hopes of playing in the National Football League have brightened.

Some team may take a chance on the multi-talented Frazier. But he's not banking on it for certain.

"I'll go out and do my best," Frazier said. "If my best isn't good enough, I'll have my degree to fall back on."

Keith Zimmer, the assistant director for academic programs at UNL, said Frazier always had put academics first.

"He's a very sensitive person and a very focused person," he said. "For us in the academic program, we're really proud that he's on track to get his degree in May."

So is Frazier's mother.

Pricilla Frazier wanted her son to get a college education.

She wanted her son to go far away from home for college.

Even if it meant he would be able to come home only two or three times a year.

Even if it meant she wouldn't be able to see every one of her son's home games.

Tommie Frazier's mother wanted

him to remain in school and get a degree.

During Frazier's senior season at Manatee, recruiters flocked to the Frazier home. Some of the top schools in the country made stops in Bradenton. Notre Dame, Florida State, Nebraska and so on.

But Frazier's mother already had tossed Miami, Florida and Florida State out of the running for her son, a USA Today All-American quarterback.

Too many times, she had seen local athletes go to in-state schools and end up coming back home before finishing school. She had even seen two of her brothers come home from college and never go back.

"They found a way of getting home," she said.

Priscilla Frazier didn't want that to happen to her son. That's why Tommie Frazier's final five schools were Colorado, Nebraska, Clemson, Syracuse and Notre Dame, with Clemson, S.C., being the closest to home — almost 700 miles away.

But Tommie Frazier still gets home, and every time he does, he goes to see his high school football coach.

Joe Kinnan knows the Frazier family well. He's coached three of the five Frazier brothers at Manatee. And he knew Tommie Frazier would be something special.

Four years ago, Kinnan said that Husker fans wouldn't be disappointed by Frazier, and that by the end of Frazier's four years at Nebraska, Husker fans would be happy that he wore the scarlet and cream.

Frazier became the first true freshman quarterback to start at Nebraska under Osborne. But that didn't happen in high school. He didn't start until his junior year. He didn't even play football for Manatee during his freshman year, and he played junior varsity and was second string on the varsity squad in 1989, his sophomore year.

"He probably would have been on varsity sooner," Kinnan said, "but he didn't play as a freshman."

Instead Frazier played in a youth league, but once Frazier put on a Manatee uniform, he made a major difference.

In 1989, he started at quarterback for the seven-game junior varsity season before jumping up to play seven games for the varsity team that won the Florida state title that year.

The next year, Manatee lost 20 of 22 starters off that state champion team, including all 11 on offense. So Frazier knew the burden would be on his shoulders, and he responded as Manatee went 12-1 before being defeated by the eventual state champion in the state semifinals.

Frazier was the team's most valuable player his junior and senior seasons, and he was named captain his senior year. He also played basketball for three seasons, along

with baseball and track.

"He's a competitor," Kinnan said. "He has one focus: to do his best and to make everyone around him do their best."

That focus has remained with Frazier in college as well, something that doesn't surprise his high school coach one bit.

"He had some long-range goals," Kinnan said, "and he knew where he was going."

"So many times nowadays, that's not the case."

Frazier isn't accustomed to losing. In high school, his Manatee team contended for state championships. As a starter at Nebraska, Frazier lost only one regular-season game.

But when it comes to children and the community, Frazier doesn't mind getting beat — routinely.

Every Tuesday and Thursday, Frazier makes a trip to Bryan Memorial Hospital to visit young children. Ever since he entered Bryan Memorial last year for treatment of his blood clots, Frazier had taken a liking to entertaining young patients.

And frequently a Sega dominates the conversation.

The game is "Mortal Kombat," and Frazier marvels at what the young children can do with the controller in their hands.

"There are 6- and 7-year-olds doing things you don't even know about," Frazier says of the moves that must be made in the game. "I try to ask how they did them, but the kids say, 'I'm not telling.'"

In New York, the five Heisman finalists went to St. Vincent's Children's Hospital in Staten Island. When Frazier walked through the automatic sliding doors at St. Vincent's, he nervously looked up at the crowd of autograph seekers. But once he started visiting the patients, he seemed right at home.

He went from room to room on the third and fifth floors of the hospital, greeting children and signing autographs.

"He's a very caring, focused young man," Zimmer said, "and that's not the side that people normally see."

Frazier goes to Bryan Memorial twice a week. He speaks at the annual School is Cool Jam at the Bob Devaney Sports Center. He speaks at elementary schools during Red Ribbon Week. He visits ailing cancer patients who, through the Make-A-Wish Foundation, wanted to meet him. He and teammates Barron Miles and Tyrone Williams saved a neighbor's house from burning down in the summer of 1993. He has been a two-year member of an NCAA committee on sportsmanship and ethical conduct in athletics.

"For how involved he is in the community," Zimmer said, "it shows how much he desires to be a role model."