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BECOMING YOUR BEST

Stories Of Hope And Encouragement About Individuals With Disabilities

Becoming Your Best Newsletter

Each of us faces obstacles on a daily basis. Some are minor, while some seem to be insurmountable at times. There may even be times when we get so discouraged we want to give up entirely.

No matter how bad things may seem, remember there is always hope. Even though we might not know or understand the “why” of the challenges we face, they eventually reveal themselves. In most cases, we will overcome the obstacle that seemed insurmountable and move on with life.

Our first story is about a young man who faced challenges from birth. Even though he had one complication after another, his life impacted others in positive ways. His story and the life he lived reminds me of a quote by Albert Einstein:

“There are two ways to live your life. One is as though nothing is a miracle. The other is as though everything is a miracle.”

Thank you, Dr. James F. McKethan, for sharing a very personal story with our readers. It is an inspirational story that will be source of encouragement to others.

Dr. McKethan is the author of [Section 504: From Referral to Placement](#) available from LRP Publications. You can find out more by going to www.mckethanllc.com.

Our second story is about a young man who has not let the challenges in his life keep him from pursuing his dreams. He is truly a remarkable young man who is an inspiration to others. I trust his story will provide you hope to follow your dreams.

I would like to thank James Tyler Casey for taking the time to participate in a telephone interview with me and sharing his personal story with our readers. I wish him all the best in pursuing his dreams.

Send your inspiring stories to: stories@becomingyourbest.com.

Subscribe to our FREE newsletter—e-mail: newsletter@becomingyourbest.com

The photograph is by Bob Sumners—see more at www.shootthebeach.com.

[WE ARE NOW ON FACEBOOK—BECOME A FAN AT BECOMING YOUR BEST.](#)

Mission:

We are dedicated to presenting inspiring stories of hope and encouragement about individuals with disabilities.

These stories of success are meant to provide support and the keys to “Becoming Your Best!”

Thank you for your stories and your support!

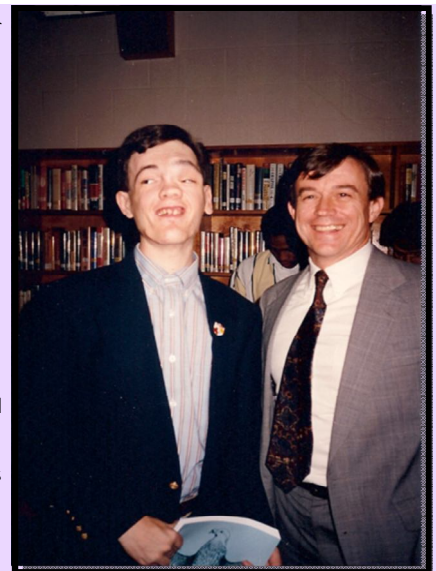
George M. Graham Jr.

JAY'S STORY (JAMES G. "JAY" MCKETHAN 07/23/73 – 07/21/93) WRITTEN BY HIS FATHER, DR. JAMES F. MCKETHAN

This story is one of humor, perseverance, courage, and choosing to "become your best" no matter the barriers one faces. My son, Jay, chose not to allow profound medical conditions to limit his quality of life. Rather, he chose a life of faith and triumph.

Jay's first day on the world scene was July 23, 1973. His birth was unremarkable except for a translucent quality of the skin on his upper right thigh that revealed the veins underneath, which was a foreshadowing of future medical problems.

During his toddler years, a benign tumor on the sclera of his right eye was removed. Later, Jay was referred to specialists at the NC Memorial Hospital after his pediatrician became alarmed about the unevenness of his cranium. This would be the first of many appointments and hospitalizations. In addition, Jay was seen by experts at Hersey Memorial Hospital in Pennsylvania and at the Massachusetts General Hospital where he was diagnosed in 1989 with Proteus Syndrome, otherwise known as the "Elephant Man's" disease. Extraordinarily rare, only 14 cases of Proteus Syndrome were reported in medical research at the time. The condition was named for the Greek god who had a chameleon-like ability to change his appearance. Since that time, there have been only 200 confirmed cases. What this meant for Jay was a very uncertain future.



Jay and Dad (James McKethan)
1993

During his short life, a number of medical conditions came to light including veins in his legs as large as an adult fist. He underwent surgeries to remove tumors in the left auditory canal as well as to correct irregular oral-cranial development. Later, Jay lost the sight in his right eye because of the narrowing of the left optic foramen. Jay still had vision in his right eye even though an inoperable mass surrounded the other optic nerve. One side of Jay's skull grew much more rapidly than the right side, resulting in an asymmetrical appearance of his head and face. Eventually, Jay underwent a surgery that for a short while made his forehead symmetrical. But over time, the problem reappeared. On two occasions Jay had surgery to remove tumors from the lining of his brain.

A third surgery for these tumors was aborted due to blood clotting irregularities. Hoping to understand the blood clotting issues, doctors performed a liver biopsy which is a very invasive procedure. A significant liver failure which could be treated only with a liver transplant was discovered. A stent was placed in his pulmonary artery to stop a fatal embolism from reaching his lungs. His complicated medical condition meant that Jay was not a viable liver transplant candidate.

Although Jay was not fond of trips to the hospital, he was always kind and respectful toward physicians and hospital staff. He had spunk. A smile comes to my face when I remember one of his trips to the hospital. We arrived at the front entrance to the hospital. Jay's mother got out of the car and headed to hospital admissions, while Jay and I took the car to the parking deck. I got out of the car and out of the corner of my eye realized Jay was still in the car, but behind the steering wheel with a spare set of keys in his hand. He told me that he was going back to Fayetteville. Almost instantly, I replied saying, "I don't know about you, but I'm going to admissions."

With that, I flipped my newspaper under my arm, turned and began walking away from the parking deck. After only a few strides, I heard Jay calling out to me, "Wait a minute, I'm coming with you."

Jay had a wide range of interests. He enjoyed music which included Christian groups like Truth and the "boy-bands." Anything military was of particular interest. Trips to Fort Bragg and Pope Air Force Base on Armed Forces Day were exciting for Jay. It didn't matter that he had already taken the tour of the USS North Carolina, Jay was always ready

"JAY'S STORY" CONTINUED

to go again. He looked forward to annual camping trips in the North Carolina Mountains. Although he could not play sports, he participated as a manager of the basketball team. It goes without saying that the UNC Tar Heels was his favorite basketball team. During what was to be his last hospitalization, a nurse and an IV- pole accompanied Jay to the Smith Center to see a Tar Heel basketball game and to meet the players afterwards. Other interests included computer technology and radio broadcasting, including ham radio transmissions.

He did not complain when it was obvious that he did not feel good. One of his high school teachers shared the occasion when she knew Jay was not feeling well, but when asked how he felt, he simply said . . . "I'm alright."

But he was not reluctant to talk about his medical issues. To help others understand more about his condition, he made "Proteus Syndrome" the topic of a Woodman of the World speech. Jay finished second in the school competition, but more importantly his classmates and teachers learned about his medical condition.

There was the time when his mother rushed him to the doctor; his heart was racing at over 200 beats per minute. On the way, Jay asked his mother "Am I going to die"? Jay was the recipient of a "wish" from the Make-A-Wish Foundation. Understanding that the Make-A-Wish Foundation provided special experiences for children and adolescents with life threatening medical conditions, Jay's wish was to visit Disney World and Cape Canaveral.

Because of his interest in radio broadcasting, Jay eagerly seized the opportunity to record a radio public service commercial for the Make-A-Wish foundation following his "wish" trip. His words revealed an understanding of his own mortality.

Secure in his faith, Jay's thoughts turned to eternity. Later, Jay and I had a conversation in which he told me that he was finished with doctors and hospitals. In a clear, resolute voice, he said "It is between me and the Lord." He wanted to know what Heaven would be like. I shared with him Biblical descriptions of Heaven. In June, Jay made a final trip to UNC Memorial at which time he said "no" to another hospitalization.

One of Jay's classmates called him an inspiration because of his perseverance in dealing with his medical problems. As well as courage, she spoke of his unquenchable thirst for life which he displayed through his cheerful and friendly nature. He was the kind of person who never met a stranger; Jay loved being around people, whether they were "old-timers" at the annual Old Threshers Reunion or his peers attending a Presbyterian youth conference in western North Carolina.

Describing Jay as "terrific," one family friend spoke of the good feeling people gained after talking with Jay. Using attributes that characterize those with a personal relationship with God, Jay's pastor described him as authentic, genuine, joyful, and filled with the grace of God.

In July of 1993, Jay enjoyed another trip to tour the USS North Carolina. On July 20, the last night of our vacation, Jay was at peace fishing from a pier at Long Beach, North Carolina. The next morning Jay died from a deep venous blood clot. Two days later, Jay was buried on his 20th birthday.



Jay (left) and his cousin Nate (right) 1986

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"JAY'S STORY" CONTINUED

In memory of Jay, his basketball coach created the "*Jay McKethan Courage Award*" given to the player who best exemplified Jay's courage. The "*Jay McKethan Memorial Scholarship*" was established and has been given annually to provide a student with disabilities financial support in his/her post-secondary education.

Jay had a "sweet" and gentle spirit and he persevered to overcome barriers. Jay was confident in what he hoped for and certain of what he could not see. His legacy was that he "became his best." The privilege of being his earthly father was, and continues to be, a blessing to me.



THE LOVE OF MUSIC BY GEORGE M. GRAHAM JR. (BASED ON INFORMATION PROVIDED BY JAMES TYLER CASEY)



What do you do when you are in need of some relief from all of life's stress? James Tyler Casey, a recent graduate from Hunt High School in Wilson, N.C., said, "For me, music is a stress reliever from everyday life, because when I play I can put my heart into it, and do something I truly love."

Tyler, born on December 18, 1990, was legally blind from birth. Even though he has been visually impaired all his life, he has not allowed it to hold him back from accomplishments and doing what he loves the most. Tyler says he never really thinks about being visually impaired.

Tyler has had an interest in music "since he was old enough to understand and enjoy music." He always wanted to pursue music. "I grew up around country and bluegrass music," Tyler said. "The song that really got me interested in bluegrass and the banjo was 'The Ballad of Jed Clampett.'"

Although his great-grandfather played the guitar and harmonica and his great-grandmother played banjo, harmonica and the piano, no one in his immediate family plays any instruments except his brother, Scottie, who plays the guitar. Tyler said Scottie's taste in music is a little different from his own. He likes the "heavier music."

Scottie was the one to show Tyler how to play some chords on the acoustic guitar when he first started playing. Tyler said, "When I was 16, I started learning to play the banjo." He was on his own at this point. "Everything I learned was self-taught," James said.

Tyler has broadened his repertoire of instruments he is now able to play. He said, "Currently I play banjo, guitar, and I'm learning the piano. I have also tried playing the mandolin and fiddle." He added, "The other main instrument I would like to learn during my life is steel guitar."

Tyler currently has two acoustic guitars and three banjos. He enjoys working on his own instruments, but there are times when friends help out too.

At this point, Tyler plans on furthering his education by going to college and studying music. "I am not sure what my final career will be, but it will revolve around music," he said. "Music is the most important thing in my life and will be there until the day I die."

"If I can give anybody a message of hope to do anything, it would be to set good goals, reach for your dreams the best you can, and always aspire to do the best you can," Tyler concluded.