

REPORTER'S NOTEBOOK

Special children offer lessons of a lifetime

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BY CANDACE PRESTON-COY

Over the course of my 25 years in journalism, I've met many extraordinary people of all ages, vocations and walks of life. I've also found myself in situations that had both positive and negative effects on my life and the way I live it.

None has caused me to look deeper into my life than some of the children I have encountered along the way.

There are those whose artistic talents -- on the stage, in the art room or the football field during a halftime performance -- brought culture into my life.

There are those whose academic talents left me with a greater confidence in the future of our country.

There are those in the special education classrooms who struggle every day to master even the simplest acts, like writing the first letter of their names, learning to count money or smiling when they are happy.

But those that force me to look deeper into myself and appreciate what I have are the kids who have faced or continue to face life-threatening illnesses, and the families who face that journey with them.

Five stand out in memory. Here are their stories.

I never met Lindsay Jones, although our paths probably crossed in the halls of Dublin Scioto High School where she was a student until she died of a brain aneurysm just days after starting her senior year in 2002.

I have met her mother, Kathy Harrington, though, through her work promoting organ donation. Lindsay chose to be an organ donor when she got her driver's license. But, more importantly, she told her mother what she had done so when Kathy was asked if she wanted to donate Lindsay's organs so others might live a better life -- or just live -- she didn't hesitate.

Go to www.lifelineofohio.org to sign up to be a donor. To read Lindsay's story, as told by Kathy, go to the personal stories section and click on "I Am So Proud of my Daughter."

I never met Ryan Owens, a 2007 Olentangy High School graduate who he died from alcohol poisoning after a night of binge drinking in August, days before he was to head to Miami University (Ohio) on an academic scholarship. By his family and friends' admission, this was the first time he did this, and it resulted in his death. His father, Don, speaks publicly about his son and the tragic consequences of binge drinking. A foundation has been formed in Ryan's name, as has a Web site dedicated to advocacy and awareness. Go to www.ryanwilliamowens.org.

I first met Madison Rose Reed on her second birthday, in a classroom at Dublin Coffman High School. Her dad, Carl, is a teacher there and her mom, Annette, is a nurse. Students at the school had coordinated a birthday party in her honor.

When Madison was 6 months old she was diagnosed with type I spinal muscular atrophy, SMA1, the leading cause of death for children under the age of 2. Her parents were encouraged by doctors to not take any

extraordinary efforts to prolong her life, but Carl and Annette chose to fight.

On Wednesday, Feb. 4, Madison celebrated her 12th birthday, surrounded by family and a few friends because even a minor winter ailment for us could prove fatal to her, said her mom. For the past 10 years, a fundraiser -- Angels in the Endzone -- has been held at the Buckeye Hall of Fame Caf to raise funds for SMA research at Ohio State University. The need for research money continues, though, and people can visit Madison's Web site to read about her and SMA research, and make donations. Go to www.miracleformadison.org.

Tyler Alfriend and Mason Woods shared a common bond and enemy -- leukemia.

Tyler, a junior at Dublin Jerome High School, was diagnosed with Burkitt's lymphoma and leukemia in November 2007. He went through months of treatments that were so painful and debilitating most of us couldn't handle them. But throughout those days and weeks, he smiled, encouraged his parents, brothers and friends, and forced himself to get out of bed at Nationwide Children's Hospital and at home almost every day.

Throughout Tyler's journey, his father, Kyle, maintained a blog that didn't mince words or try to sugarcoat what Tyler and those around him were going through. And, while often painful to read, it also served as a source of inspiration for the thousands who traveled there and left behind comments. That site -- www.tyleralfriend.blogspot.com -- also provides links to the Web sites of other children who are struggling with the disease, and those whose struggles have ended. It also provides links to cancer sites where you can learn more about the disease and how to help.

Tyler has been in remission for more than six months but his dad continues to provide frequent updates.

That is where I learned that Mason was losing his struggle with the disease. He died with his family and clergy by his side Tuesday morning. The link to Mason's story is on Kyle's blog.

I met Mason and his family in November when photographer Lorrie Cecil and I visited them in their Westerville home to do a Thanksgiving story about 9-year-old Mason and the bone marrow donation he received from his older brother, Trey, in January 2008, which put him into remission.

What struck us was the boundless energy that the curly-haired Mason exhibited, and the bond between the two boys that exceeded brotherly love. Shortly after that visit, Mason showed a few signs that the disease might be trying to return. Last week, he was back on J-5 (the cancer floor at Children's). Tests confirmed the cancer was back with a vengeance. As I wrote this column on Sunday morning, Mason was still fighting to beat the disease, but the attack on his central nervous system just overwhelmed his body.

I called Lorrie, apologized for bringing such bad news on her day off, and talked about how we should handle this news in the paper. That is when I decided to write this column, not just about Mason but also about Tyler, Madison, Ryan and Lindsay and how each has left his or her mark on those around them and turned my/our world into a better place.

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