

His Unforgettable Smile

Like most other sixteen-year-olds, I looked forward to the day when I would be handed my license and could enjoy the freedom of the open road. However, what was more significant than my newfound driving capabilities was the small, hardly noticeable heart and green ribbon on the corner of my license. I didn't just become a driver that day; the day I got my license was the day I became an organ donor. While the thought of having organs ripped out of my body is not pleasant, to say the least, choosing to be an organ donor was the clear choice because of my friend, Richie.

For as long as I can remember, Richie and his family consistently visited St. Louis twice a year. My sisters and I always looked forward to his arrival because it meant a week filled with board games, sporting events, and all-around fun. But unfortunately Richie's visits were never just to see the sights of St. Louis or the people who live here; his family came to go to St. Louis Children's Hospital where Richie could receive the best care.

He was living with cystic fibrosis and came to St. Louis regularly since his double lung transplant at six years old. Despite the fact that the effects of his surgery reached to his daily life, he did not complain as the average child might. I had to be bribed with Junior Mints on the rare occasion I had to take medicine, but Richie took large amounts of medicine daily without complaint. Whether the pills were crushed and mixed into applesauce or swallowed whole, Richie simply took the meds, drank his signature can of Sprite, and proceeded with his day. Even with his many prescriptions, Richie was forced to go to the hospital frequently, but I never heard him complain about his health issues. Actually, he didn't talk about his health issues at all. He never bragged about his scar like many young boys do or asked for sympathy from anybody. Even in high school, as his health began to deteriorate and he was forced to wear a breathing

tube and ride in a wheelchair, he still carried on with school, youth group, and managing his school's basketball team. It seemed to me like nothing could ever stop him from doing the activities he was passionate about.

Richie died during October of his senior year in high school when he was just seventeen years old. At some point, Richie must have realized that he would not live forever but, as he told me, "you only live once...why miss the opportunity?" Even after everything he went through, from his transplant to the treatments years later, he didn't let anyone else know if he was feeling down. Richie became the strong person he was because of his cystic fibrosis and everything it put him through, but I will never remember him as just a kid with an illness because in my eyes he was so much more than that.

Having Richie as a friend has influenced me in ways far deeper than becoming an organ donor. Richie had a perspective on life that was beyond his years. He tried not to worry about the future because, as he said, "what's the point if you have right now?" I will always aspire to have his fighting spirit and phenomenal ability to keep a smile on his face. My mind always wanders back to him when I'm upset or am having a bad day, and putting things into perspective is easier when I think about how he was able to brighten other people's days with his smile while going through harder times than most people will ever face. With this in mind, the stress of school and other activities is much more manageable, giving me confidence in my ability to accomplish my goals. When I think of Richie, I'm reminded of how fleeting life is and the importance of making the short time I am given meaningful. While I may not think about the lessons I have learned from Richie everyday, I do factor them into all significant decisions that I continue to make in my life. As a high school senior, the biggest question I face now is what I want to do with my life. Because of Richie, I know I want to pursue medicine as a career so I can help others like

him. While I sometimes worry about voluntarily choosing a profession in which I will inevitably be surrounded by sickness and death, I know it will all be worth it if I'm able to prolong the life of someone like Richie. It will all be worth it just seeing another kid like him smile.