Tribute to Mattie: An Angel on Earth

On June 16, 2004, 13-year-old Mattie JT Stepanek died. In his eulogy, former President Jimmy Carter referred to Mattie as an angel on earth. An angel, he said, is among other things, a messenger. Mattie’s messages of love, hope, and peace have stirred the hearts and souls of millions of people in his short life. The author of 5 books chronicling his Heartsongs, Mattie’s poems have been an inspiration to all who read them, and anyone who has had the chance to know Mattie is forever changed and blessed beyond measure. I was one of the fortunate people who had the privilege to accompany Mattie on his journey and to learn from one of the wisest people I have ever known. Mattie’s spirit reflected angelic innocence, intuition, wisdom and unconditional love. He was a personal messenger, an angel who significantly shaped my life and my work.

Despite Rare Illness, Mattie Left Legacy

Although his life was shortened as a result of a rare form of muscular dystrophy, Mattie lived life to the fullest and has left an everlasting legacy. Oprah Winfrey and former President Jimmy Carter spoke of Mattie’s zest for life. Mattie spoke often of the importance of living each day to the fullest and to play after every storm. Mattie lived each day with increasing uncertainty about the length of his life and, yet, was not afraid of death but more of the process of dying. In his dying Mattie continually reminded all of us of what really matters and of the work that is left to be done to create a peace-filled world.

In 2001, when it seemed certain that Mattie would die, he shared three wishes — to meet Jimmy Carter, to be on the Oprah Winfrey show, and to have his poems published. Each of Mattie’s wishes was fulfilled, and many more miracles followed.

Mattie’s uncanny ability to find the truth in every situation and to see beyond the obvious challenged others to reach higher ground. In September 2001 shortly after the 9/11 terrorist attacks, Mattie shared his wisdom with attendees of the Pediatric Nursing Conference in Philadelphia. In an hour-long presentation that was punctuated by calm but challenging bouts of breathlessness, he offered nurses thoughts about being respectful of children when they are patients, and providing authentic family-centered care. His simple, truthful words were received with a standing ovation.

Later, in 2002 he was the recipient of the Pediatric Nursing Humanitarian Award, recognizing his worldwide contributions to humanizing health care and promoting peace.

Jeni, Mattie’s devoted mother, role model, friend, and behind-the-scenes organizer, is an inspiration as well. A relentless advocate for Mattie, Jeni’s steady, unwavering commitment to assuring his access to high quality care while courageously challenging individuals and health care systems was instrumental in Mattie’s life. Mattie and Jeni were inseparable. Their soulful connection was palpable and profound. Jeni’s vigilance and watchful presence were instrumental in helping Mattie realize and share his gifts.

A Reminder of Life’s Fragility

An excerpt from a poem by Mattie reminds us of the fragility of life, the depth of love and grief we carry with us.

...And Now, I am so sad.
But even though my heart is broken,
I still have the pieces inside and
I can put them back together again...
...I will always be able to see
Where the breaks were, but
I can have my Heartsong altogether
again...

(Excerpt from First Anniversary, 2003)

As Mattie suggests, we will always carry him in our hearts and eventually we will put our heartsongs back together, but not without the enduring imprint of loving our Mattie — poet, peacemaker, and philosopher who played.

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