

Greetings,

I am writing on behalf of Simon Jones. His mother, Brenda, reached out to me and explained the Flyin Ryan Hawks Foundation. It is a wonderful gift you offer to others in honor of Ryan. As you extend these gifts to others, Brenda and I would ask that you consider Simon. I am a Pastor at a church Simon attends for Youth Group, or teen nights. He was invited through a friend years ago, and since then, I don't think there is a teen who attends that is not his friend. He is loved. Simon is a joy filled, love giving, humor dispensing, young man. He is always willing to give things a try, always ready for the next adventure or challenge and brings an excitement that is infectious to the rest of the group. At the same time, he is also an encourager. He uplifts others and makes them smile. Simon is not an out front leader, he can be soft spoken at times and quiet. Giving respect, humbling himself, putting the focus on others, but then lets loose when the time is right and brings the group with him. They love him and he returns it. He has been a blessing to me and a lot of others.

I say all this with a mix of happiness and sorrow. For Simon is diagnosed with DSRCT Cancer. It is stage 4. The cancer has infected his liver and spread into the lymph nodes around his windpipe in his throat. He has been battling it for a number of years, going through multiple bouts of radiation treatment, and at one point having the doctors declare that the cancer was no longer visible. As expected, there was a lot of celebration from friends and family. However, Simon has learned that the cancer has returned and is already at stage 4. All known treatment options have been tried and they are now moving on to trial and clinical drugs to try and keep the fight going for Simon. Unfortunately, Brenda and her husband were informed that if the clinical options do not work, they estimate Simon would have months. We hope and pray it isn't so.

I recently lost my father to lung cancer. It is a hard path to watch a love one die. I remember when the doctors told us that my father had less than a month to live and what that felt like, but I can't imagine what that must be like as a parent. And yet, through all of this, what has amazed me the most is Simon's spirit. It has not wavered, it has not broken. He has been life giving while the disease has been life taking.

For example, our Youth Group just returned from a trip to South Dakota. We spent a few days on the Cheyenne River Lakota Reservation helping at their youth center, then traveled west to the Black Hills. Given the time table of his condition and the realities he was facing, Simon told his parents that he wanted to make sure he was on this trip. And so we made it happen. I asked Brenda if there were any limitations for Simon, things we should watch for, how to take care of the port in his chest, etc. Brenda said, "whatever he wants to do, let him enjoy it." So we did. We had close to 20 teens in our group, and I think Simon outworked every single one of them. When we were pulling weeds in the Reservation's community garden for days in the hot sun, and most of the group was sluggish and wearing out, Simon was still going. We'd joke about it, here is Simon out here with stage 4 cancer and he's kicking everybody's butt. Every project we did, everything we worked on, Simon made it better. It's hard to explain. He just has this way about him that generates smiles and laughter that would not exist without him. And it makes me reflect on a future time when he might not be there. It's heartbreaking to consider. He has been such an integral part of our "family." This teenage boy has brought so much into the lives of so many, even before cancer. It's just who he is; a light for others to gather around. And now, with the battle he is facing, even more so.

As we hiked the Badlands and Black Hills, Simon was at the front. Our group cliff jumped at Pactola Lake, but only three dared to climb the peak and jump from the 80' height. Simon was one of them. Port in his chest, cancer in his body, he stands at the peak and takes it all in. He sees his friends on the bank cheering, he sees the water far below, and he briefly pauses. I'm not sure what he was thinking or feeling in that moment, but I saw a young man standing up there who was LIVING. And without any signs of fear or trepidation, he leaps from the safety of the rock and launches himself into the blue. And it's in those moments, seeing what it means to Simon and his close friends as they erupt in cheers when

he surfaces and swims to shore, that you catch glimpses of the truly beautiful essence of life. Simon celebrates and enjoys the cheers for a few moments, then quickly turns their attention to Tyler who is still waiting to jump. Whether he realized or not, he shifts their praise and encouragement to another, and he is now cheering loudly with the rest of his friends in support of someone else. The jump had been hard on Simon. With blood running down his nose, shivering slightly from the cold water, laughing and shouting up to his friend who is trying to muster the courage to jump, Simon is right where he needs to be. Sometimes it's okay to jump and just be. And I hope and pray it is for many, many more years. But, if it is not, he is making the journey worth it.

He is a good kid. An inspiration to a lot of us. Thanks for considering Simon and offering your gifts to people just like him. We seek to elevate them, and the whole time they are elevating us.

"Be devoted to one another in love. Honor one another above yourselves."

-Romans 12:10

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