

Stories of Strength

THE STILES FAMILY

April 2016

My name is Joe Stiles and my wife, Deanna and I are proud to share our son's survivor story. Sam had just turned 5 when he was diagnosed with acute lymphoblastic leukemia in late November of 2009. ALL, as it's known, is a cancer of the blood caused by the bone marrow manufacturing cancerous blast cells instead of healthy white blood cells. Sam's leukemia presented itself through pain in his hip, extreme fatigue and eventually a swollen lymph node in his neck. We spent Thanksgiving at Riley Children's Hospital that year, and I still say it was the best Thanksgiving our family has ever had. It marked the beginning of a major victory for Sam and gave our family the opportunity to experience the very best in humanity and to appreciate God's blessings in a new way.

From the day Sam was diagnosed over six years ago until today, our family's testimony is one of appreciation for the countless gifts we received. The opportunity to receive love and return it, the opportunity to show courage against pain and adversity and the opportunity to humble ourselves before God – these were our family's gifts. Deanna and I believe that God's blessings are often delivered through the love his children show one another on earth. We are his instruments. We experienced those blessings every day through friends, family, nurses, doctors, volunteers, and perfect strangers. The rally around Sam began immediately after his diagnosis and never stopped. The support was overwhelming and we could feel the prayers and outpouring of love from day one. We were scared, but we weren't fighting alone. Countless people were praying for Sam and we felt the impact. What a gift to be able to look at your first-born son, a cancer survivor, and see all the best in people.

Sam's courage and steady demeanor in the face of so much pain, discomfort and uncertainty was incredible. He was a rock. For anyone who has battled cancer or has closely supported someone with cancer, you know how invasive and not only painful, but consistently uncomfortable and exhausting it is. Sam's treatment lasted 3 and half years and he never showed anxiety or fear at what was coming. He was poked in the spine, the chest, the legs and the arms too many times to count. He was brave every time. He was transfused regularly, hospitalized often, medicated all the time, operated on and overall beaten down physically. His spirit didn't waiver. He spent the better part of four years feeling run-down and not quite like himself and when he came out on the other side he did not look back in bitterness, but in victory, stronger than before. He didn't linger on his battle and never once used it as a crutch to get special treatment. He went to school, played sports and bore this formidable burden with courage and grace. We are so proud of him. What a gift.

I think the pain of seeing a child suffer is unlike any other. It hurt to see Sam suffering, like a constant dull ache. That suffering gave Deanna and I the unique opportunity to practice humility, empathy, patience, and to strengthen our faith. I found myself



The Stiles Family

(from left) Sam, Nick, Deanna, Joe, Will, and Maggie

thinking of Christ on the cross during Sam's treatment. I'd look at the crucifix and contemplate suffering and fatherhood and sacrifice and love. That image helped give me strength and reminded me that God was with Sam, especially during his most difficult moments. Our family spent a lot of time surrounded by other kids mired in their own cancer fights during those years. Some of them were fighting against much greater odds. We learned to appreciate every victory and the great hope we had for Sam's healing. All we could do was lean on God and trust that he had Sam in his grip. He did and still does. What a gift.

At the beginning of Sam's second grade year, we hit a scary stretch in his treatment. His blood counts were low and they wouldn't stabilize. His energy was low and he wasn't feeling good. He was hospitalized on a couple of occasions with fevers and infections. We had many questions and few answers. The doctors just couldn't figure out what was wrong and we feared the worst. Sam ended up missing the entire first month of school in 2011. Thankfully he did not relapse, which was our greatest fear, and he was put back on a normal treatment schedule. When Sam was able to return to school he was sitting in Karen Neeley's classroom. What a blessing she was to our family. Having beaten cancer already once herself, she was in-tune with how Sam was feeling and what he needed. She identified when he was feeling fatigued or upset. She kept us informed of every little change and every challenge he was facing at school. During one of Sam's most difficult times, he was delivered into the care of the perfect teacher. What a great lady.

What a gift.

Participating in the b STRONG event last year was an honor and we can't wait for this year's race. Sam is running the 5K and he's been training! Mrs. Neeley's spirit is alive in all the activities of b STRONG and the people that support it. She epitomized courage and caring for our family and she continues to be a great source of pride, love and hope in Bremen and beyond.

I drive by b STRONG Hill every day on the way to work and I remember Mrs. Neeley and how much she meant to Sam and our family. I know she'll be looking down at Sam with great pride and a smile as he crosses that finish line.

Today, Sam is 11 and cancer-free. As you read Sam's story we would ask for prayers for those whose battles continue. No two people react to treatment the same and the twists and turns are unpredictable and terrifying. Looking back with gratitude for the gifts received along this journey is a blessing for our family, but certainly not everyone affected by cancer finds that same comfort as easily. Some, perhaps, not at all. Your prayers and intercessions for those fighters and their families make all the difference and Sam is a testament to that.



Sam Stiles is celebrating that he is cancer free!

SATURDAY, JULY 30TH 2016

Proceeds to Benefit:
MEMORIAL
CHILDREN'S HOSPITAL
and
b STRONG 31:6 FUND
a component fund of the Marshall County
Community Foundation, Inc.

b STRONG
1 MILE WALK / FUN RUN & 5K



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