

For Jake

January 05, 2004 to June 16, 2020

First let me confess that I feel like a failure because I was not the best father I could have been for Jake – he more than lived up to his end of the bargain as my son, but I did not as his father. Frankly, I didn't deserve him as my son, but God blessed me with him despite all of my own shortcomings. Jake was better than me in every aspect of life; he was the best at everything he attempted – his kind heart, strong drive, relentless work ethic, extraordinary depth of talent, fearlessness, his ability to light up a room delivering a witty comment as only he could, and astonishing intellect were beyond exceptional. He always sought out the toughest challenges in everything he did; never shying away no matter the likelihood of failure and all doing so with an infectious smile and selflessly caring for those around him. He was an amazing son, loving brother, adoring cousin, loyal friend, and teammate.

Jake had a distinct, unique bond with his mother Katie – I admire her courage for standing before you tonight giving that heartfelt speech. Jake was Katie's T-berry and she was his biggest, strongest, and loudest supporter in everything he did from geography bees, quiz bowls, cross country races, to swim meets. Katie was the mamma bear protecting and loving her cub, and no one was going to get in the way of their relationship. Jake adored his Ma and the proof on display with the simple act of letting her kiss him out in public at swim meets with all of his friends around. He gave Katie a special type of comfort, joy, and love no one else in this world gave her.

If I've learned nothing else yet during this tragedy, is that life is precious, fragile, and not fair. But I firmly believe standing before you tonight that although sad and tragic this is for us as we grieve for him, we should not morn his loss. Instead, we should celebrate his life and thank God that He blessed all of us for knowing Jake. We should feel comforted in knowing that Jake was doing what he loved up until the very end, a lesson all of us should apply. On paper, Jake only had 16 short years on

this earth and the world is truly at a loss because of the enormous potential and bright future he had ahead of him. I know he was destined to do something great, but that was not in God's plan. It is selfish of me to dwell on the idea that I will never see him graduate high school and college, see him fall in love and marry his wife, see him raise children of his own and become an amazing father, and be there for him during hard times all along the way while having the opportunity to atone for my own past mistakes in our relationship. Again, this was not in God's plan.

I will tell you that he lived more of a life in 16 years than most on this planet and he was a modern day Renaissance man. For those that think this is just an exaggeration by grieving parents, let me tell you just a little bit about just how special he was and the rich, extraordinary life he led:

- Jake spoke German and Spanish with ease. He was our family's translator during a Christmas vacation throughout Switzerland. He won a bet at his Middle School in North Carolina that he couldn't speak German the entire day.
- He thrived in modern medicine and neuroscience college-level curricula at Davidson College and Duke University in the summer of his 7th and 8th grade years. In my heart, I know he was going to be the United States Naval Academy's number one draft pick for the Class of 2026.
- He knows the Bavarian and Tirol Alps' hiking and skiing trails like the back of his hand. Jake got to experience every corner, train station, restaurant, and bakery in London, Paris, Prague, Munich, Rome, Dubrovnik, and Istanbul. He even once expressed boredom with the thought of another trip to Venice, Italy.
- Jake was a role model and inspiration to his brother William, always setting the best example and caring for him. He was his mother's rock during hard times and while I was away. Jake was blessed to have had Katie as his teacher in three different grades.

- He got to walk in the footsteps of where the Apostle Paul once taught in Ephesus.
- Jake has seen the horrific impacts of evil in this world if left unchecked at a Nazi Concentration Camp in Dachau as a 5th grader.
- He never earned a school grade less than an A attending 8 different schools while testing into separate gifted programs four different times; he read every book he could get his hands on.
- He was extremely dedicated to his teammates on the West Pine Middle School cross country team, Pinecrest High and Newsome High School swim teams; selflessly seeking informal leadership roles and cheering on his teammates to their successes and helping them get better while earning Varsity Letters at two different High Schools.
- Jake was the two time defending JSOC Youth Triathlon champion in his age group beating the offspring of the world's most elite warriors.
- He was both an expert skier and snowboarder, which if anyone understands is very hard to achieve. When he was seven, he got mad at me one time for not taking him down a black diamond run called, 'Suicide' at the Sandia Peak ski area.
- Jake had a work ethic like I've never seen, inspiring me and countless others to be better every day with his motto, "Bruh, grind don't stop."
- He sought every opportunity to volunteer and make his community better whether it was helping sweet old ladies at the Pinehurst Country Club or small children in Sunday school at Christ Community Church.
- He's been to the birth place of the Olympics in Greece, crowded around the Mona Lisa in the Louvre, ate margarita pizza just feet away from the Roman Coliseum, stood on the 4-corners, fed the pigeons out of his hands in Venice's Piazza San Marco, enjoyed hearing local musicians

play on the Charles Bridge in Prague, snowboarded Germany's and Austria's highest mountains, cheered on Atlanta Braves and Tampa Bay Rays players hit home runs at Turner and Tropicana Fields, heard the cannons fire in the Endzone celebrating a Bucs' victory, seen the majestic views of the Grand Canyon, looked up at the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, seen the lights of the Eiffel Tower overlooking Paris at night, enjoyed watching the buffalo and elk roam free in Yellowstone, ate steak at the Big Texan, strolled the endless shops of baklava and gifts of the Grand Bazaar, dressed in lederhosen and celebrated Oktoberfest in Deutschland, walked the Chapel Bridge in Lucerne, was the only one in our family to actually go into the Neuschwanstein castle, heard the clock tower of Big Ben, had tea time at the Fortnum and Mason, ate the finest French foods while cruising down the Seine River, heard the Pope give a sermon in Vatican City, drank butter beer at the real Harry Potter museum, enjoyed his favorite gelato Stracciatella at Paradiso, played golf in the Sandhills of Pinehurst, kayaked the Nantahala River and Lake Plensee.

- Jake got to experience my highest professional achievement helping promote me to Lieutenant Colonel at the JSOC memorial – a sacred place honoring America's greatest heroes who gave the ultimate sacrifice.
- He competed at national level swim competitions and mastered the skydiving wind tunnel.
- Jake performed in a lead role in a play unexpectedly revealing his wide range of skillful acting talent to the audience.
- He's seen all of the monuments honoring our country's presidents, past wars, heroes, and museums in our nation's capital.
- Jake knows all too well the real costs of freedom on our families when we deploy our service men and women into harm's way to protect our nation. He kept our family intact and my

marriage with Katie together when I deployed to Iraq when he was a toddler and he witnessed the pain and raw emotions very few ever see when I returned.

- He received recognition and many awards for his gifted artwork, which would give the likes of Picasso and Van Gogh a run for their money.
- He never quit in the face of failure – he never won a wrestling match, but that never discouraged or stopped him from trying to get better.
- Jake got to experience the love and joy raising his pets Toby, Tiger, Rudy, and Cat; he grieved for the loss of Toby and Tiger when they passed away.
- He saw true poverty and knew he was blessed beyond what he had ever deserved.
- Jake's resilience to change and the unknown were unmatched, he could adapt to any situation and rise to the occasion every time. He lived in nine homes, six states, and two countries.
- He lived and befriended people of all ages from many different cultures and celebrated with them in their holidays and traditions.
- He saw and understood the world for what it is, but had high hopes he could make a difference.

Therefore our initial reaction to this tragedy is absolutely wrong; Jake already DID something great in his life and he made the world a better, brighter place by touching all of our lives. He had a rich and blessed life allowing us to be part of it. His legacy is the difference he made in all of our lives and what we choose to do in the future to make the world better in his honor. This is God's plan. Katie and I are so amazed and blessed to hear your own personal stories about Jake and how much of an impact he made in your lives. Just seeing the overwhelming and out pouring of love is a

true testament of the person he was, but this should not be surprising. As we were cleaning out his room in the aftermath of his passing, we found his prayer journal and it was astonishing for us to learn the depth and extent of his caring, tender heart; a heart he truly had for the Lord – something he did not advertise or brag about. He did not focus his thoughts and prayers on his own desires, hopes, and dreams; rather, he prayed for his family and friends during their hard times. He felt all of our sorrows and he prayed to the Lord to heal our pain.

Yes, we are saddened by the sudden tragedy of his passing which the pain will never leave us; but in this process, we should focus on remembering and celebrating his life. We should find comfort in knowing who Jake was, the life he lived, and the way he lived it. I pray our hearts do not turn bitter and lead us down a road of anger and despair because of this tragedy in the years to come. I pray that we all can hear God more clearly, find meaning and follow the path He wants us to take, and use this to achieve the goodness of God's will.

Katie and I have been asked by a lot of you, "How can we help?" Through the shock, pain, and numbness of it all, I didn't really know how to answer that until now. You can help us by remembering Jake for the amazing person he was in your own special way every day. Please continue to tell us your stories about Jake; Katie and I find extreme comfort in learning how he has touched your own lives. But more importantly, you can help us by finding your passion and strive for excellence as Jake did every day. Always look to find a silver lining of humor in a tough situation while caring for one another. Attempt to achieve the same level of mental toughness that he displayed through hard times. Aggressively seek out the toughest challenges; do not avoid them because you think it's too hard or there's a possibility of failure but because Jake HAD THE GUTS TO TRY. Live by his motto, "Grind don't stop." Remembering and honoring him in your own way is all that Katie, William, and I ask of you.