

Santa Barbara Independent

Thursday, December 13, 2007

By Anders Bergstrom, with contributions from Maggie Baker, Frank Riley, and Jacob and Sarah Tell

Danny Riley 1988-2007

Photo: Paul Wellman

According to Danny's mom, "From the time he was very small, Danny expressed a special talent and passion for music. His music became a vibrant means to share his love and struggle as he lived with cancer for nearly three years."

On October 31, 2007, our friend Danny lost his battle with a rare and ruthless brain tumor. In addition to being an avid songwriter and musician, he was also a dedicated friend and family member and, most of all, Danny was a teacher of love, strength, patience, and the overwhelming power of the human spirit to all who knew him (or even just met him).

This is an ode that very easily could have been written in 2004. Danny was a 17-year-old junior at Eastlake High School in Chula Vista when he was diagnosed with a pleomorphic xanthoastrocytoma. For most, this would qualify as a life-altering event, but Danny's lighthearted nature, razor-sharp wit, and general joie de vivre was left untouched by the cruel pestilence that had made its home in his brain. This very young man never let his illness break his resolve to enjoy the inevitably shortened series of moments that would constitute his life.

Danny had the ability to make you laugh with him, even at his own expense. I saw him in June at SOhO and had a good chuckle at the then-chubby Danny lumbering across the dance floor toward me in untied sneakers. "Guess who's got a new surgery scar!?" he bellowed, as if announcing that he'd just bought a new car. I'm not likely to ever forget that.

Danny had a fortitude that manifested itself in his apparent freedom from worry. In spite of overwhelming adversity, he always delivered comfort to those who loved him, and all you needed was to look him in the eye to obtain it. It's a strange human phenomenon, isn't it? We learn as very young children to read subtle facial expressions; we attribute meaning to tiny bats of an eyelash, a flip of the hair, or the minute upturn of a frown. We can tell when someone is scared, angry, or even when they're faking it. But Danny held his resolve, never letting us see through his hum and giggle how truly awful he felt. In this way, his friends and family wouldn't be held down under the immense weight of the burden he was meant to bear. And once you looked Danny in the eye, you'd understand from that moment forward that he wasn't scared. He wasn't angry, and there was no way he was faking it. When I think of this now, it astonishes me that someone of Danny's age had the strength to single-handedly calm the hearts — even if for just a short time — of the friends and family who loved him.

Before meeting Danny, when I'd close my eyes and picture cancer, I never saw a tumor or a hospital room or the all-too-familiar effects of chemotherapy and radiation. I saw a vast desert, a place where individuals are sent to test their ability to survive, under unspeakable conditions, all on their own.

Danny's wonderful support structure of doctors, friends, and about the most loving family in the world made sure it wasn't like that for him.

After getting to know Danny Riley, the image in my head is a little different. I still see the same desert, only now it's surrounding an oasis. Our friend Danny sits, strumming his guitar and gently swinging back and forth in a hammock strung between palm trees. Danny found his way to that oasis long ago, so that we would never have cause to pity him or mourn his death before that terrible day arrived. Thanks to Danny, we'd never hesitate to sit with him in his hammock, in his oasis, in his desert, and listen to him sing.

We miss you, Danny.

As a tribute to Danny, friends and family have established a fund to help children with cancer enjoy the gift of music. The fund will be used to provide musical instruments, music lessons, and other musical experiences for children with cancer. Tax-deductible donations can be made out to Family House, 50 Irving Street, San Francisco, CA 94122. Be sure to mark in the "memo" area of the check: "Danny Riley Celebration of Life Fund."

To hear Danny's music and read his poetry and prose, please visit dannyriley.com.

