

## THE IDLE AMERICAN

A Lad Gone Too Soon...

Commentary by Dr. Don Newbury

Column #1,071 for Release Week of December 25, 2023

At commencement exercises several decades ago, the speaker droned on about the attributes of a graduate whose mark on the school was incomparable. The crowd hung on his words, uncaring that his extended commentary would throw the ceremony off schedule. So what?

A mother--unknowingly standing next to the esteemed graduate's mom--whispered, "I'd give 20 years of my life to have a son like that."

"You didn't miss it far," responded the proud woman, whose only son was at her primary focus since his birth....

\*\*\*\*\*

This memory jarred like bold-face type early on the chilly morning of Tuesday, December 19, 2023, when a phone call from a distraught mother struck a mighty blow. She shrieked, "Bryson is gone."

His life ended unexpectedly and way too soon--hours before his 20th birthday--when his potential to serve humankind seemed endless.

Immediately, I joined her in the dark of misunderstanding that only parents can begin to fathom. (My wife and I, too, had been jolted by the loss of a child in 2020. Our late daughter, Julie Choate, was struck down at age 50 by a pulmonary embolism, hours before the beginning of her 29th year in education.)....

\*\*\*\*\*

Within minutes-- when top-sided again with a modicum of composure--the lyrics of a century-old Christian hymn, Farther Along , offered comfort. Seven words in the lyrics help Christ-centered mourners forge on.

The words? "We'll understand it, all by and by."

For the next few hours, my memory in overdrive, I reflected on a friendship with Bryson and his mom Chris that began 17 months ago. We met at a baseball game where Bryson's team was competing against one whose line-up included our grandson, Jonah McDaniel. Jonah's dad, Ryan, overheard Chris mention how she and Bryson prayed for next steps to his pre-law study at a Christian university....

\*\*\*\*\*

We visited briefly after the game. I had never met a young man with more poise, respect and determination. At a strapping 6-2, his sea-blue eyes and piercing smile invited friendship. He immediately seemed interested in investigating Howard Payne University, where I graduated in 1961 and served as president for a dozen years late in the last century.

A few days later, I received the nicest letter--ever. He was grateful for our visit and was eager to visit the campus where he'd enroll a year later.

Since that time, I have learned about some of the mountains he and his mom have climbed. Their commitment, to Jesus Christ and each other, no doubt sustained....

\*\*\*\*\*

They're from Tupelo, MS, where Bryson will be buried alongside his dad, Brett, who lost a three-year battle with kidney disease a decade ago. During the 10 years with his dad, Bryson idolized him.

Even then, Bryson was ravaged by unannounced seizures. He survived the attack of a vicious dog, undergoing facial plastic surgeries, seizures and body weight that ballooned to almost twice normal size. His mom trudged on, with full attention on him. She was determined to overcome whatever got in the way, including a fire that consumed their only car.

Ever sports-minded, they sought a coach who would understand his situation....

\*\*\*\*\*

They found one in Memphis, TN, nearly 100 miles away. Chris signed him up, and they didn't miss a practice or a game all season long, despite her driving some 200 miles each trip!

Later, a coach suggested that they get a "fresh start" in Texas. About four and a half years ago, they headed to Keller, TX, where Chris would work for an air-conditioning company and Bryson would set Keller Central High School back on its heels.

Always goal-oriented, Bryson needed only a part of COVID's first year to lose 100 pounds. He went out for both football and baseball, organized a student Bible study and initiated a debate team that qualified for state competition, even without a sponsor! With sports came injuries, however, but he was regarded as the team leader, even if on the bench in slings or casts....

\*\*\*\*\*

We were in his hospital room one year ago, where he was recuperating from shoulder surgery, when Chris mentioned, "He's spent more birthdays in the hospital than out."

Determined to play college sports, he was eager for August workouts to begin. Guess what? In the first practice, he injured a little finger and ankle, admitting to neither injury until work-out's end.

Soon, he'd undergo ankle surgery back in Keller, with rehab to extend into December. No matter. He forged on, completing part of his courses remotely, with junior status nailed down by semester's end....

\*\*\*\*\*

Just weeks ago, HPU President Dr. Cory Hines invited me to speak at semester-ending chapel. Brenda and I invited Bryson to drive us to Brownwood. There, he'd get to see college "buds," sleep overnight in his dormant dorm room and visit professors.

Did I mention that it mattered not that he had no wheels, and only weeks earlier got a restricted driver's license? Did I say that he organized a foundation called "Kidney Head" to help youngsters with kidney disease? Did I mention that he championed Tupelo--his hometown--melting my wife's heart with the declaration that Elvis Presley hailed from there, too?

Oh, there are countless multiple superlatives about this life. It is noted that his efforts in the fading hours of election day helped a Keller city councilman win his race, and how his resolve helped so many people. Hey, maybe Bob Anderson, a family friend and Federalist author, might consider writing a "Bryson book." (I met Anderson at a vigil held at Keller Central ISD baseball field on December 22, when throngs gathered to remember Bryson....)

\*\*\*\*\*

His impact at HPU is immeasurable. He was involved in student government, as well as the university's recognized moot court team.

Bryson was a team leader with a capital "L," whether on football fields or baseball diamonds.

He could have been a "poster guy" for D-III athletics, playing sports for the right reasons, chuckling at the thought of ever signing an N-I-L corporate contract or playing sports professionally....

\*\*\*\*\*

A "Go Fund Me" account has been set up for Bryson. Within hours, more than 300 had contributed. Further, the Bryson Burks Endowed Scholarship has been established at HPU. Persons who wish to participate may send checks to HPU, PO Box 2369, Brownwood, TX, 76804, or online at [www.hputx.edu/give](http://www.hputx.edu/give).

We feel privileged to have Bryson and Chris in our circle of friends.

We are promised to understand tragedies such as his in the "sweet by and by." In the meantime, we'll promote friendship and understanding, urging everyone to keep--and share with others--the importance of keeping phone numbers to the suicide prevention hotline close at hand....

\*\*\*\*\*

Dr. Newbury, longtime university president, continues his regimen of writing and speaking. Contact; 817-447-3872. Email: [newbury@speakerdoc.com](mailto:newbury@speakerdoc.com).