

The Ryan O'Connell Story

Ryan O'Connell was a spirited third grader at Saint Raphael Catholic School at a time when the school community was a tightly-knit group of about 150 students. In the 1999-2000 school year, nearly every school family knew each other, classes were in the parish center, and the school building we know today was just a dream.

Like a lot of eight year old boys, Ryan's exuberance often translated into a little extra attention from his teacher, Mrs. Merlin. "He had to write a lot of notes home about his behavior," says Ryan's mom, Karen. "I worried sometimes that Ryan would start getting discouraged, but he didn't. He always hopped out of the car, backpack jiggling, happy to go to school each day." Ryan was a classmate everyone knew. His love of learning was apparent every night at bedtime. "Ryan loved to read about unusual facts. *The Guinness Book of World Records* was a favorite," Karen remembers, "I'd often find him in bed, asleep with books on his chest, and have to turn out the light at the end of the day."

It was a happy time for the O'Connell family. One day, Ryan came home from school on a Friday with strep throat that ended him up in the emergency room the next day. It was February 2000. Ryan's symptoms escalated and his health declined rapidly. The strep began taking a strange course attacking his muscle linings. He was admitted to UNC Children's Hospital and placed in Intensive Care. Some days Ryan would seem to be getting better; other days he would be worse. Always a fighter, his body was doing the same - but to an extreme. His body began attacking itself. Over the course of nearly three months, Ryan endured 13 surgeries, blood clots stemming from a previously-undiagnosed blood disorder, and eventually the shut-down of his kidneys. What began as a routine illness became an all-consuming battle for Ryan's life.

Karen reflects on that time, saying, "Over those two and a half months, I only went home one day. It was a scary time for all of us." The O'Connells had two other young children at home who were also a part of the SRCS school community. "During that time, I never had to worry about Caitlin and Shane, or things being okay at home. And much was due to us being a part of the Saint Raphael family," Karen recalls. Notes and get-well messages from his classmates reminded Ryan he was loved and missed at school.

Ryan never came home, and he never returned to school. On May 5, Ryan - who fought so hard for so long - passed away at UNC Hospital when he couldn't fight any longer. In the midst of this great loss, the O'Connells still counted their blessings. "We were fortunate because my husband's work situation allowed us to focus on Ryan without worrying about being able to pay our mortgage or cover tuition." Karen adds, "We also had our families and Saint Raphael friends helping us. We saw many families at the hospital with critically ill children having to leave them for work or to manage their households. It was heart-breaking to think that in the middle of something like this, that they might also have other life-changing hardships as a result." From this amazing ability to see their blessings through sadness came the idea for the Ryan O'Connell Scholarship Fund.



The O'Connells wanted to make a difference. Their goal was to help ensure a family in crisis might not have to make a choice between tuition and other financial needs. To this end, the Ryan O'Connell Scholarship Fund was established and continues with the family's support.

Ryan had shown a fondness for golf, so the annual Saint Raphael golf tournament has been designated as a memorial to Ryan and a way for the school to provide additional hardship funding for the Scholarship Fund. Today, the memorial golf tournament continues to create happy memories in Ryan's honor, with several of his old classmates coming back to participate and support the day. The community that created this special place years ago for a spirited eight year old boy to learn, laugh, and make the most of his short life here on Earth, is still working together to make our extended community a better place.