

Hi Karen and David,

We are very sad to tell you that our grandson, Gabe Valentine, lost his battle with Epidermolysis Bullosa on Tuesday morning, June 6th. He was just ten weeks shy of his 9th birthday and was in considerable pain from the open wounds that covered over 50% of his body. He died in bed with his parents, Mike and Nell at 7:30 am and was buried in an honorary police ceremony on June 10th in Mississippi.

He was surrounded by friends that have followed his journey, many members of the MSU football team, his MSU ROTC unit, his teachers and family. It was a very personal and tender memorial, filled with funny stories and poignant moments.

I am sending the letter Michael wrote for his son and was read to the congregation by his brother, Pat.....along with an attachment of the eulogy written by the football team's kicker, Westin Graves, who was a very kind and dear friend to Gabe.

I hope all is well with your family and you're enjoying your grandson as often as possible. Let me know of any news in your lives or the Norton Shores area. Enjoy the beach this summer.

Love, Gail



Mike's post.....

Since the service, I have had many people request a copy of the letter I wrote and my brother read. I am sharing it here as a testament to the Starkville and Super Gabe communities. I was only able to name a few examples from the many people in Gabe's life and made it special. Know that many more unnamed people made a huge positive impact on Gabe and his family:

Hello and thank you for being here. I have had precious little time to ponder my son's short life, but in the last few days I have repeatedly heard what a huge impact he had on others. I have heard about his selflessness and his bravery. My son was an extraordinary child who was wise beyond his years. He cared deeply for other people and often put the needs of others above his own needs. To illustrate this, I want to share with you the story of his gentle passing and the gifts he left his family.

Gabe was more concerned about those he was leaving behind than his own mortality. In fact, Gabe choose to live on long after he had lost hope and felt overwhelmed by pain because he wanted to spare his family from grief. When it was too much, Gabe asked that we stop painful medical treatments and focus on his physical comfort. But he allowed us to continue, despite his wishes, for a while until we got used to the idea that he was dying. When we finally understood the situation, Gabe apologized by saying, "I am so so sorry I have to leave you," and he asked that we not be angry with him.

During his last month, Gabe shifted his focus to the welfare of his parents. Before Gabe died, he left me with four gifts. The first came several weeks ago when he gave me a to-do list to complete in his absence. The most important items on that list were to never divorce his mother, to not be sad, and to

take care of his mother with the same effort I put into taking care of him. With those words, Gabe gave me both permission and the strength to focus not on my grief, but on my family.

The second and third gifts came the night before he died. It was apparent he had become sicker and I asked if he had anyone else he needed to contact or anything else he needed to do. Gabe replied, "No, dad, I've done it all." I then apologized that he had only a short life. Gabe said, "It seemed long to me, dad." And he is right, no matter how long we have on this Earth, our time feels like all of our time. A life is exactly a lifetime long. These gifts gave me peace of mind.

Finally, as he became delirious in the middle of the night, he turned to me and said, "I've found the secret passageway." A couple of hours later, he was gone. But Gabe left me with the hope that I can, one day, find the secret passageway to reunite with him.

Gabe had a huge impact on me and family. He seemed to also have an impact on the community. But the community also greatly, positively impacted him. I want to say a few words of thanks to the community.

As a parent, my greatest fear was that Gabe would be marginalized because he was different. I was afraid he would live a sad, lonely life; that he would have no friends or admirers. That he would not feel that his life was useful. This church full of supporters makes this father feel good about his son and his son's impact on the world.

How did Gabe become the extraordinary child who touched so many lives? Because of the people who made the effort to make him feel special. In my experience, children are all worthy of love and acceptance, but they don't know this. When people love them, support them, and encourage them, children are free to become the best versions of themselves. The love and support of this community, the best community on Earth, allowed Gabe to become the child who inspired so many.

Gabe first found love and acceptance at home. I want to thank my wife, Nell, who loved her son deeply and rolled up her sleeves to do all of the most difficult jobs so that I could enjoy so many fun times with Gabe. And his sister, Alex, who sacrificed her time to help so much with daily family life so that Gabe could grow up at all. And his brother, Griffin, whom he loved above all others. And the rest of our family for their love and support!

I want to thank our employers who were understanding and allowed us the flexibility to care for our son in the best possible way!

I want to thank our other family, the McMillens who made Gabe one of their own; a cousin to Elaina, Cameron, and Galen.

I want to thank the members of University Baptist Church who loved and accepted Gabe as their own and who brought services to the house when he was not able to visit the church.

I want to thank Gabe's teachers at FPCCC who nurtured him and helped him to feel good about himself. And the friends he made there; children like Nate, Kaiden, Michael, Riley, and Maggie who included Gabe as an equal despite his limits.

I especially want to thank all of the staff, administrators, counselors, and teachers at Sudduth Elementary School, "Where kindness counts." Isabel McLemore and Stacy Weems deserve special recognition for fostering an atmosphere of mutual caring and respect in their classrooms and for sticking with us on this journey long after they could have gracefully walked away.

I want to thank the people at Henderson, Ward, Stewart, especially Stella Turman who interrupted her class to include Gabe on countless occasions and Delisha Lacy and Brenda Brent who ensured that Gabe could continue to learn at home.

I want to thank Gabe's friends like Torian, Tyreq, Davis, Jaylen, Riyaz, Scott, Sabine, and Spencer who were always there for him. Most especially, I want to thank Mary Reeves for being Gabe's loyal protector and AJ for his unrelenting kindness.

I want to thank Gabe's adult friends like Arnolando Camarena, Rosie Oppedal, Mike and Katy Richey, Scott Wetherbee, Rob Montgomery, Derrick Brantley, Angie Patterson, Martha McMinn, Landon Griffin, and Sam Myers who invested their love and time in my child.

I want to thank Brooke Carpenter who elevated Gabe from a normal student to a child celebrated by his peers when she worked to have him inducted as an honorary member of the Starkville Police Department. I also want to thank all of his brothers and sisters in blue for their acceptance of my child. But I do have to take issue with whoever told him he could arrest his parents.

I want to thank Tracy Wetherbee who ran her heart out for him, included him on her soccer team, and coined the name, Super Gabe. And I want to thank everyone at the Starkville Soccer Association.

I want to thank Gabe's medical angels, Dr. Deborah Shirley and Lee Anne Shoffner, who accepted difficult jobs and became family as a result.

I want to thank Justin and Karen Silvers who saw that Gabe was inducted into the MSU Army ROTC. And to all of the cadets like Jake Stockton, Alexis Sessions, Beler Watts, and Brendan Jones who went to great lengths to support him. Firing the cannon was the joy of his life!

I want to thank the Mississippi State University Athletic Department. Coaches like Ginger Brown-Lemm, David McFatrach, and Dan Mullen gave Gabe special attention and made him feel good about himself. I want to thank student athletes like Westin Graves, Blaise Carabello, Katie Holt, AJ Jefferson, Amber Gass, Jerica James, and Georgiana Patrasc who made Gabe feel loved and included.

Nothing made Gabe more proud than being an honorary police officer and an honorary cadet or his affiliation with MSU athletics.

I want to thank all of the people and organizations, too numerous to specifically mention, who invested time and love in my son.

Why was Gabe extraordinary? Not so much for what he did for others, but because all of what you, the people of our community, did for him. He was extraordinary because of the love, acceptance, care, and support of the people in this sanctuary. You inspired Gabe and that allowed him to inspire others.

Which brings me, finally, to my point. Gabe's other instructions to me, besides continuing to play Pokemon Go on his account so that he could eventually acquire a sceptile, we're to work to make the world a better place by fighting to cure EB and by taking action to build up and support other local children with disabilities.

Gabe gave me an opportunity to partially fulfill these instructions today. If you have not already done so, I encourage you to make a donation to the EB Research Partnership.

And I have one more request, albeit broader than Gabe's instructions. To honor Gabe's memory, do what you can to identify and support those children who suffer. There are kids here in Starkville who are neglected, depressed, abused, or suffering from physical illness who need your help. They have the same ability and capacity to become inspiring people if we can find them, love them, and support them. I pledge to find and help child in need in our community until I find the secret passageway to a reunion with Gabe. I ask you to join me in making other children Super!