

Our Grief Journey Thus Far...

January 11, 2015

It all seems so trivial now, what we were doing thirteen months ago; decorating for Christmas, planning gifts for family and friends, wondering what we should write in the annual Christmas letter, and kids everywhere were all looking forward to Christmas break. Little did we know, those busy moments would be the last we would spend with Dalton. So much can change in the blink of an eye...

On December 29, 2013, at 10:37AM in Glamis, California, our only child, Dalton, died in an ATV vs. sandrail collision. It was a freak accident that, logically, wouldn't even be possible, but, for whatever reason, it happened that day and we are left here wondering why.

Four days later, John's brother (Dalton's Uncle Bill) died in Texas. Bill had lived with us off and on the previous eighteen months and he and Dalton were very close. We believe now that they must have learned the lessons they were here to learn, and it was their time to move on to bigger, better lives in Heaven.

That said, this year has been a blur of emotions and events we would never wish for anyone to endure. The support and encouragement we have received has been immeasurable. Thanks to everyone for the hugs, cards, kind words, food, counseling, advice, etc. We wouldn't be here without it. I would have to say though, we find the most encouragement comes from those who continue to share stories with us about Dalton; how they met, funny incidents, how he helped them and/or made them laugh, and how people are Paying It Forward in his memory.

There are times with family and friends where we can "escape" our reality of life without Dalton, and find ourselves laughing hysterically and enjoying ourselves, but the second everyone goes home, the guilt sets in like a black cloud washing over us; like we cheated and got caught and are left to face the grave consequences of being unfaithful to our grief.

We are often told that we are doing very well, and far better than expected. From the outside looking in, it probably appears that way due to the fact that we keep ourselves busy every moment of every day. While we know we can't keep up this pace forever, it's what gets us through each day right now. And, while it may look like strength, it's probably more avoidance of reality, as "quiet time" is still very tough to deal with. For John, it's the images of the aftermath of the accident, and regrets of things he said or did, or didn't do, while Dalton was here. For me, it's the constant ache of missing his hugs and worrying that I have forgotten, or am forgetting, important memories or events. For both of us, the physical pain our bodies feel has been very unexpected, specifically like there is a huge, gaping hole in our stomachs that just cannot be filled, and the short term memory loss seems to finally be catching up with us.

We've been getting together with Dalton's close friends every couple months for dinner, movies, bowling, picnics, etc. John and I feel like the time with them has been very helpful, and we're pretty sure it has been for them as well. We typically spend time learning about current events in their lives, discussing things we've all done recently to Pay It Forward, telling funny stories about Dalton, and enjoying each other. While it always hurts to know that Dalton will never be here to experience the ages his friends are experiencing, it's really cool to be able to envision what he could be doing, and who he might become, if he was still here.

I think most of us would agree (us, our parents, our siblings, and Dalton's girlfriend and close friends), we are all different people now, and still VERY numb. As the numbness wears off, anxiety takes over, and that's new territory for all of us. We are all learning to ask for help, and we are doing our best to discuss our feelings in detail with one another as often as time allows.

You may be wondering why we're sharing all of this with you, and there are a couple reasons. First, we were told by The Compassionate Friends organization that this will be healing, and second, I have always been a huge proponent of learning and sharing what I can to help others. So, while we would hope that nobody else would ever have to go through this in their lifetime, it's a fact that others will, and we would hope that our journey can help them and those around them in some small way.



Our lives are now lived in a constant fog, and based on calls we are receiving now, we must have had several conversations this last year that we don't even remember, so please don't be offended if we haven't reached out to return a call or text. If someone wasn't there to write it down for us, we probably don't even remember it occurred. We're not trying to be bad friends. Life is just very foggy and our short term memory is nearly non-existent unless we write things down right away.

"Happiness is about the journey; not the destination..." We really know the meaning of this now. We had a pretty amazing journey with DJ. He traveled more in his short life than John and I both traveled before we were in our late thirties. We are so thankful that we had him for the short time we did. He had a great life and, most importantly, he knew he was deeply loved and cherished each and every day of his short life.

*With much love and appreciation,
John, Roni, & Dalton Lambrecht*



Lessons learned...

- ♥ Our very first lesson was that of kids, cell phones, texts, and social media. PLEASE, if your child has contact with the world via phone, gaming, or computers, please have discussions with them about handling tough situations. One of the first things I had to deal with BEFORE my family even knew about Dalton's passing was the post on Dalton's Facebook page that read, "Are you dead dude?" Additionally, many of his friends found out via inaccurate text messages. Kids: Whether you think you have all the correct info, or not, if it's not your business to share information on ANY topic, keep your fingers OFF your computers, tablets, and cell phones. Parents: Please discuss this in serious detail with your children. This will help them and their loved ones tremendously throughout their lives.
- ♥ We have spoken to some of Dalton's friends who were notified about Dalton when they were all alone and it was pretty devastating for them not to have someone there to help them cope. If you are communicating bad news to someone, please make sure the receiver of that news has someone right next to them to support them before releasing the information.
- ♥ Much to everyone's disbelief, there are *not* "Five Stages of Grief." That's something Kubler-Ross made up to sell a book. If you want to call them "stages," there are hundreds of them... denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance (the five we're all told about)... and then there are shock, numbness, sorrow, struggle, surrender, lifestyle change, recklessness, entitlement, justification, out of control, anxiety, fear, guilt, relief, service, feeling sorry for yourself, constant hunger/starvation, addiction, and on and on and on. I can't tell you how many times we've been asked, "What stage are you in?" We're always in several "stages" at once. There's never just one at any given time; and it certainly is not limited to five.
- ♥ Please keep journals for your kids and grandkids. Make notes about how they look, what they like to do, music they enjoy, songs you sing together, daily schedules, funny stories, how much you love their dad/mom, every little detail. Write it down! Write them love letters and leave no room for doubt that they know you love them.
- ♥ Know your kids' and spouses user names and passwords for everything. Be VERY strict about this!!! I knew nearly every one of Dalton's and it has helped immensely to post on Facebook and to cancel his other accounts. Parents of minors aren't even allowed to close down some Internet accounts without them, even with a death certificate. And adults certainly do not have that authority for other adults unless they have user names and passwords and can do it without getting the powers that be involved.
- ♥ If you use your computer to store your photos, organize them by naming them YEAR-MONTH-DAY-EVENT TITLE. We learned that "date taken" is often incorrect (and may not even be there) and organizing them this way allows you to see how time changes you and your loved ones. This is great for graduation videos, wedding videos, and, in our case, memorial videos.
- ♥ Back up everything on your phones and computers daily (If you think you're already set up for this to automatically happen; test it!) We lost over 460 pictures from my phone that were scheduled to be backed up nightly. They weren't.
- ♥ Ask questions of your loved ones. Know their wants and requests. Write them down (or store them on AdvanceArrangements.com). We knew exactly what Dalton would want because we discussed it in detail after John's accident in 2012. These were very interesting and insightful conversations, I might add ☺, and they helped us learn a lot about each other. Grief takes you by surprise, numbs you, makes you think and do really stupid things... Please be as prepared as you can be, and share the location of those preparations with someone you trust, and start today.
- ♥ Buy life insurance. We had to pay for preparations twice; once in California and once when we got Dalton home. \$21,000 later, not counting time off from work... need I say more? Be prepared so that your family can focus on their grieving process and each other rather than wondering how the bills are going to get paid. I can give you great referrals for this, if needed.
- ♥ Take lots and lots of pictures and videos!!!!

Q & A

These are questions we have been asked multiple times, so thought they were worth sharing...

"Were Dalton's organs donated?" We wish they could have been, but the accident site was just too far away from a hospital for them to stay "alive" long enough to be donated.

"Do you think Dalton felt any pain?" That's something we'll never know for sure, but we have been told that he could not have felt anything due to the type of impact.

"How could you go back to work so soon?" Anyone that knows us, knows that sitting around has never been something we were good at. And, to be quite honest, "quiet time" is nearly suicidal, so sitting at home, wallowing in our self pity, is clearly not an option. Being as busy as possible is our best escape. We work to survive!

"Have you been to counseling?" Yes. We tried counseling and some other group sessions and, for right now, they just don't help. We are very blessed with an amazing circle of family and friends and it has been very helpful to be counseled by them. Thank you to everyone who has lent a shoulder or an ear. We deeply appreciate you all!

"How is your marriage holding up?" After nearly 20 years of marriage, raising a son, building two homes and four businesses, we are stronger now than we've ever been. We have much deeper conversations. We are more open and less judgmental with each other. We seem to have a lot more patience with each other now, than we do with the rest of the world. John speaks his mind much more now, where, before, he would hold a lot inside. Just when we thought we couldn't love each other more, we have been surprised to find our love growing exponentially each and every day.

"What's the best/worst thing someone has said to you?" We've spoken to several grieving parents who have told us how much bad comments or questions hurt their feelings, so we figured out early on to make a very conscious effort to keep what we like and discard the rest. Most importantly though, we've learned that it doesn't really matter *what* someone says, as long as they say *something, anything* that ties to Dalton, (rather than pretending he never existed) and we are very thankful when that happens.

"What are you doing with his room and his stuff?" For the time being, Dalton's bedroom has remained just as he left it (other than the bag of chips I found in his bottom drawer ☺). We spend a lot of time in his room talking to him, crying, discussing memories, etc. It's where we both feel closest to him, so no changes there thus far. We've given a lot of his hoodies and toys to family and friends, and we've decided we need to wait for quite a while to decide what we do with the rest of his things.

We've also been asked multiple times if we think Dalton had any foresight into his passing, and that can be answered several different ways. Months, weeks, days, and minutes before the accident, there are several strange happenings that have led us to believe this was the way Dalton's story was written...

- ♥ RCHS accidentally deleted Dalton from their computer systems three times; once in October 2013, and twice in December 2013. The third time was pretty upsetting for Dalton and he came home asking if this was a sign that they didn't want him at that school anymore.
- ♥ The night before the accident, when he told me, "I'm very content with my life right now." What 15-year-old says that???
- ♥ Twenty minutes before the accident when he handed me his GoPro video camera off his helmet, which he'd used all week to film *every single ride* we'd been on, and said, "I won't be needing this today, Mom."
- ♥ The new toy hauler camper that had been on our vision board for over five years. Somehow, we were led to buying a used one just three days before our trip. Had we not had the enclosed toy hauler, we would not have been able to bring Dalton home with us. We would have had to wait out the plane delays due to the cold weather and it would have taken nearly four extra days to get him home by himself (not to mention, they wouldn't allow me to travel with his body).
- ♥ I had written a journal to Dalton since before he was born with details of how he looked, how we felt, stories of things he said or did, and I had told him in October 2013 that he just might get to read it before he turned 18, because I only had four pages left in this one and I'd need to start a new one. I hadn't been able to find the "next" journal as I wanted it to match the size and style of the current one. Those four pages are still blank because I just don't know what to write yet.
- ♥ Due to John's ATV accident in 2012, Dalton and I had some very deep conversations where he told me he would never want a "funeral" because that was too sad; he'd want a party. He also told me he would never want to live as a "vegetable," and that when he died, he'd want his ashes spread in Glamis, as that was the best place he'd ever been in his life and he loved the way he felt there... completely free. We've done our best to fulfill his wishes.



Dalton's ashes have already been spread in:

- ♥ Divide, CO - Painted Rocks
- ♥ George West, TX - G'ma & G'pa Bradfute's river wall where he loved to fish
- ♥ George West, TX - Deer Blind where he shot his first deer
- ♥ Glamis, CA - Imperial Sand Dunes
- ♥ Marine Base at Camp Pendleton, CA (Thank you, Ian Fidino!)
- ♥ Port Aransas, TX - Gulf of Mexico
- ♥ Texas Creek, CO

In the future, they'll be spread in:

- ♥ Japan
- ♥ Piedmont, SD - Uncle Craig and Aunt Annette's property
- ♥ Walden, CO - Northern Sand Dunes

As the Pay It Forward cards say, Dalton lived his short life with the intent to create smiles, laughter, and happiness. He spent hours talking to friends and strangers (who soon became friends) trying to help them through tough times and find happiness. For Dalton, and your other loved ones in heaven, please take as many opportunities as you can in your lifetime to perform random acts of kindness and Pay It Forward in their memory.

Memorial Fund dollars were used for...

- ♥ We sponsored the Warriors football team who vowed to Pay It Forward in memory of Dalton, and we've heard many beautiful stories from and about this team. They mowed lawns, pruned bushes, bought meals, served meals, house-sat, pet-sat, etc., all for free, and in Dalton's memory, handing out a Dalton card to each receiver in hopes that they would then do something nice for someone else and the domino effect could take hold. It was really cool to hear the stories from folks who were on the receiving end, and what a small world it is that many of the receivers knew Dalton and were surprised to see so much good being done in his name. It was an honor to speak to these boys and their parents, and we hope it will have a long-term impact on their lives.
- ♥ We helped Mrs. Spurlin and Mrs. Hulst at Rocky Heights Middle School with their annual Pay It Forward campaign in April 2014 by having bracelets, pins, and stickers made to share with the students, and also by speaking to the students about Dalton, and his legacy of performing random acts of kindness.
- ♥ We used half of the memorial fund to create and purchase signs to hang in Glamis in the miles surrounding the accident site in hopes to prevent more tragedies like this from happening to other families. Previously, the speed limits have only been posted online, in the small print on the back of park passes, and on a couple flyers at the few camp kiosks they have when you pull in to Glamis (that we had never even seen before). The speed limit where Dalton's accident occurred is 15MPH. According to the police report, Dalton was going at least twice that speed, and the boys in the sandrail were going 3-4 times that speed. If it helps just one family avoid this reality, it's worth it.
- ♥ We had a 90"x90" wrap made for the back of the camper that turned out beautiful. Now Dalton can push us forward each step of the way...
- ♥ We had flags made for all our 4-wheelers and trucks so Dalton can always be with us when we ride feeling the same feeling he loved when he was here; like he was flying over the dunes.



Sadly, just since we've lost Dalton, we've learned of several other families who have lost teenagers to various circumstances. We've done our best to give advice on what they'll need in the beginning and beyond, and we've shared our contact info with the parents in case they ever need anyone to reach out to. We are consistently trying to help others, as that seems to help us cope better with this new life. We hope you'll find new ways to Pay It Forward each day as well.



This was sent to us by a family friend who has also suffered the loss of a child in her family...

There is a clock that we live by.
 It's there ticking on the wall or on a wrist or bed side table.
 There is the clock that tells us when to get up, when to leave, when to stay, when to eat, sleep, drink, exercise, when to work and when to play.
 There is the clock that guides us from one moment to the next, from one day to the next.
 It steers us to some degree. Keeps us on track, on time, on schedule.
 Then there is the clock that started when you stopped.
 That is the clock that ticks for me now. It doesn't seem to sync with the other clocks that surround me.
 It keeps imperfect time, the alarm going off in unexpected places and at unexpected times.
 I can't seem to set this clock or control its hours.
 It wakes me when sleep should be here and tells me to lay down when there is so much to do.
 I don't know how to keep time with this clock or to tell others what time it is either.
 Is it crying time? Or quiet time? Is it time to seem normal and fine? Is it hide in the shower and scream time?
 Or calmly read to the kids as if nothing has happened time?
 I don't know how to tell when it is a right time to do the right thing or say the right thing or feel the right thing.
 This is the clock that grief built. It ticks in a rhythm that has no beat and its sound is of tears hitting the table top.
 It keeps imperfect time, makes no sense, yet it is the clock that suits me the best right now and I have a hard time reading any other timepiece.
 Others around me can't understand this clock, but that is only because they live in a different time zone than me.
 A time zone where grief doesn't exist. A time zone where I once lived.
 This is the clock that started when you died. And until this clock stops ticking,
 or I can find a way to return to the time zone I once lived in,
 I will just have to learn how to understand this new time, this new rhythm, this new pace my life has taken.
 And know that in each tick of this time... there is you.

-Vicki-