

Read Zachary Williams' Essay

From the end of fifth grade to the end of seventh grade, my life was plagued by adversity. Not long after graduating from cub scouts to boy scouts, our troop was dealt a devastating blow. At summer camp, one of my friends, who was also another scout's brother, passed away in a tragic scuba diving accident. Needless to say, the youth group was rocked to its core. I do not think that any of us who were there will ever truly be able to move on from the tragedy and heartbreak of that week. As an 11 year-old, I did not know how to cope with loss, and struggled with the reality of death. It did not help that, over the next year, I would come face-to-face with more tragic events and a heart condition. I was present for the death of 11 people in an accident at the Reno Air Races, Dan Wheldon's death in an Indy Car accident at a Las Vegas race, as well as at my grandmother's home when she died during surgery. At the end of my seventh grade year, I was hospitalized for a week in the ICU for Ventricular Tachycardia, an electrical problem with my heart that caused it to beat erratically. As hard as it was to go through all of these events, I am thankful for them because they have molded me into who I am today.

No child should have to go through such hardship at such a young age. I did, though, and I have learned a very important lesson from it: enjoy the present, as it will not last forever. Now, I find it easier to appreciate the little things in life. I am devastated by the deaths of my scout friend and my grandmother, but I will always cherish the good times I had with them. The scar I have on my knee from having too much fun at scout camp will always remind me of the good times I had with my friend, even if he was only in my life for a short while. Instead of mourning the loss of my grandmother, I reminisce about the good old days as a young child running around her overly-fragile house in Phoenix. These lessons have taught me that I should live in the moment instead of mourning the past.

My heart condition was surgically fixed about a month after my week-long stay at the ICU. I may have to write it down on doctor's forms for the rest of my life, but I have made the most of my healthy heart. Within six months of my surgery, I had joined a swim team and ridden a 150-mile charity bike ride with my dad to help people affected by Multiple Sclerosis, which my grandfather has. The next year, I ran a half-marathon. Now, I compete in triathlons. I recently placed 4th at the Nevada High School Triathlon Championships, and I look forward to competing in longer distances this year. Having a healthy heart has made all of these things possible, and I appreciate being able to do these things more than I ever could have before. Because of the hardships of my pre-teen years, I appreciate the little things in life so much more than I used to, and I have been forced to grow up faster than most of my peers. I look to the future with hope and determination rather than confusion and worry. I respect others' backgrounds rather than be quick to judgement. In education, athletics, social life, and beyond, I have learned the value of everyday experiences, and I hope that everyone gets the chance to learn these lessons, just without the adversity I experienced.