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CHAPTER 2: CHEERING ON

Colin

My son Ryan was diagnosed with Ventricular Tachycardia in May of 2009. To date, the exact reason has not yet been identified. It has been over two and a half years and I am now just able to write about Ryan and share my story in hopes that it will help someone else find comfort. During those first years, I could not help but cry when I heard an ambulance siren or feel deep panic when my son's phone number showed up on my Caller ID.

Thursday, May 21, 2009, started out a normal day with our family of five: My wife Jennifer and our three boys Kevin then eighteen, Ryan thirteen, and TJ ten years old. That day would test our scheduling skills. Home from work and school with just enough time to eat and catch up with the day's events. Tonight we have to be in three different places with each of the boys. So the plan gets finalized. Jennifer would take Kevin to Career Night at the High School. I will drop off Ryan at Boy Scouts, and TJ will go with me to our Cub Scout meeting. It's a big event for the cub scouts as this is our season wrap up and "Cub-apolis," an Indianapolis 500- inspired race with seventy-five plus Scouts running laps in cardboard boxes all individually decorated. Weeks were spent planning, preparing and it was finally here. Will it go ok? Will the Scouts have fun? Are the parents going to behave? Sometimes competition brings out the best in some and the worst in others. As the evening unfolds, the excitement and fun is evident in all of the sweaty red faces. The Scouts are rewarded for their achievements and the leaders breathe a sigh of relief as the day comes to an end without incident.

My cell phone rings and it's my friend Tim on the other end, "Hey Colin, you better come over to the Church parking lot. Looks like Ryan collapsed from dehydration while playing "capture the flag." I responded, "Be right there Tim. TJ we need to go NOW." Hurrying to the Boy Scout meeting, I began thinking of past events where we have had to keep a close eye on the Scouts from becoming dehydrated. It can easily happen during a day filled with fun. We arrived within minutes and found Ryan laying in the parking lot and looking much worse than I had imagined. As I began talking to Ryan, my First Aid training started to kick in without even knowing it: Legs were numb, skin was cold and clammy, and his heart was pounding. He had thrown up all over. I shouted to Brian, "Call 911 we need help now." At this point, everyone realized this was more than dehydration and Ryan was getting worse. The EMTs and Police arrived in minutes. I was pulled away from Ryan

to begin to recounting what had just happened. Quickly things progressed to what seemed to be a hundred questions. Does your son have a past history? Where has he been? Do you know if your son is taking drugs? This looks like he may have taken Ecstasy. You know, "E" is becoming a real problem with teens. I informed them that Ryan was not into that and we know his friends. That's not it. What is going on? Ryan was now on the stretcher and in the ambulance. The EMTs informed us that they were going to take him to Northwest Community Hospital and figure this out.

Fear began to take its hold. I frantically tried to reach my wife and son Kevin at the High School. Once, twice, three times. The calls went unanswered. Why won't they pick up? The school is notoriously known for being a cell phone dead zone. "Tim, can you take TJ home with you? I am going to the hospital and I can't get a hold of Jennifer or Kevin."

"You got it. No worries take care of Ryan." "Thanks."

Both the ambulance and I speed off. "Please pick up, please pick up." No answer. The sirens wail on ahead of me. "Is this really happening? What's going on?" The ambulance makes it to the hospital well before I do and now I struggle to find out where to go.

"Are you Dad?" "Yes, yes I am. That's my son."

They began cutting off his remaining clothes with a whole team scrambling around his bed hooking all sorts of instruments to his body. "Your son arrested in the ambulance ride over, but the EMTs were able revive him." Again, I have to describe what led up to this, past histories, drug use. "What's going on?" He's crashing again. It's like I am seeing a medical program on TV as I watch my son intubated, followed by CPR, and injections. "Everyone, CLEAR. Dad we need you now." The nurse grabs me by the arm, "Dad you stay here by his foot and keep talking to him. You don't let him go and we will do our part. Keep talking, he needs to hear you and let him know it's not time for him to leave." The doctors continue doing CPR, assisting his breathing, and increasing the levels of the defibrillator with each shock. He's flat lining and nothing is working. I was just cheering my youngest son to win a race, now I am cheering another son to live. "Ryan you need to fight. You can do it. I am here with you. Keep listening to me you can do it. Fight Ryan. Fight."

Twenty minutes pass and the nurse calls out, "I got a pulse. He's back with us. It's getting stronger. You did it Dad. He heard you. Great job." I am shaking uncontrollably at this point. Relief. Ryan is stabilized. I have to get a hold of Jennifer, still no answer. Finally, I get through.

"What? Where are you?" "At the hospital?" "Are you sure he's ok?" "Just get here quickly."

My wife arrived and again the story gets repeated. Now the doctor joins us and gives us even more details. We need to transport your son to Children's Memorial Hospital so they can figure out what caused this. It's decided that my wife will go in the ambulance with Ryan and I will follow.

Ok now where is the rest of the family. Hurried calls are placed to my Mom, Kevin, and Tim, "I need your help. We don't know what exactly is going on. We'll call you as soon as we find out something more."

Now almost midnight, I managed to call my best friend and tell him what has been going on. I totally break down and am sobbing in the car while driving. I have no idea how I made it to Children's Memorial hospital without getting into a car accident. Arriving at the hospital, I head to the ICU where the doctors began trying to figure what caused Ryan to go into cardiac arrest. At two

thirty in the morning, Dr. Raj sat on the floor at our feet as we listened to him explain what had happened and what they are going to do,” Looks like Ryan is stable, but we are going to keep a close eye on him.” How unbelievably compassionate Doctor Raj is, looking up at us assuring they will do everything they can. My wife and I hold each other and look at our son. Was this really happening?

In the days that followed, test after test were performed; each one coming back negative. Great news, but what caused all of this? After nearly a week in the ICU, it is determined that because Ryan had a recorded EKG showing his heart beating at over 300 times a minute, the best course of action is to have an Implantable Cardioverter Defibrillator (ICD) surgically connected to his heart and start a course of medicine to allow him to heal and lower his heart rate. Ten days later and Ryan is finally released from the hospital with medicine, rules, and follow up visits scheduled. More information and events have transpired than we could possibly absorb.

So much information is readily available on the internet. Finding out as much as possible about the functions of the heart, causes of arrhythmias, potential reasons, brings a level of comfort and control. Seeing Ryan alive, smiling, and looking perfectly fine except for the four inch long scar on his chest quickly snaps me out of dwelling on all that has happened. It becomes clear early on that there will be no way I can be with Ryan at all times, so we make sure he is able to answer any question about his condition.

In November 2009, Ryan was at Boy Scouts when I received another call. “Colin, the ambulance is on the way. Ryan is awake and talking but his ICD went off.” We follow the protocol taught to us and call the cardiologist and then go to the hospital. One of the EMTs recognized Ryan from May and they are able to catch up on what has happened since then. Ryan is in control with the help of his ICD. It is confirmed as an appropriate shock. We are released from the hospital after checking that the lead wires are OK and the device is working fine. We decided to have genetic testing done with hopes that it would reveal why. No luck. Negative.

Ryan continues to amaze us with how strong he is physically and mentally. Ryan is not the typical baseball playing type of boy. His interests were always more artistic in nature and he started playing the alto saxophone in junior high. Marching Band in High School is his love. In July 2010, during summer training for Marching Band, his ICD went off. Again, we are back in the ICU to see what is going on and why Ryan keeps having arrhythmias. More tests. All negative, Ryan’s medicine is switched up to include a calcium blocker along with the beta blocker. With this new combination and the ICD, it is our best bet.

Ryan has been seeing a therapist since March of 2011 and we are continuing to heal, grateful each day to have all of our children with all of life’s ups and downs. In October 2011, we were able to go to a conference in Ann Arbor, Michigan, the Young ICD Connection, and take another step forward. Next year, Ryan hopes to tell his story and meet more people like him. In the beginning, we were not sure that Ryan would have any kind of a future.

Today, our doctors seem like family and check-ups are more like reunions. As a parent, I will always have concerns, but now they are pushed to the back of my mind by hopes and dreams: Watching our son grow, learn to drive, graduate, go off to college, and beyond. I am so grateful for all those around us and those who we have met throughout the years.