

Essay on Courage

By: Jordan Vander Velde

"Mom and I waited in the parking lot in the sizzling July heat, waiting for my sister to show up and lead the way to her house in the city. You see, my mom and I aren't the best with directions, and navigating through a city without an idea where you're going can be a little nerve-wracking. The bright blue Honda Fit and the matching confident driving style that was so familiar made its way onto the black asphalt of the Sobeys parking lot. Out of the now parked car waddled my very rotund, pregnant big sister wearing her bright orange sun dress and cat-eye shades. Her size and her waddle didn't match her style, but she went with it anyway. Before heading to her house in the suburbs, we picked up plenty of snack foods for our girl's weekend.

Once we were in her air conditioned home that was in the middle of a renovation, and had said hello to her husband Mike and her large and rambunctious puppy, the excited squeals began. I loved her adorable belly and couldn't stop asking to touch it. She beamed and proudly showed us the vertical brown line developing down the center of her taut pregnant belly. Three weeks to go until the baby boy would arrive! Or so we thought. There for the weekend, we unpacked our oversized bags, threw on our most comfortable clothing, started in on the chocolate covered almonds and broke out the board games. For some silly reason, the big fat pregnant lady decided to sit on the carpeted floor of the basement, leaving my mom and I to the couch. We talked about the baby names her and her husband, had chosen for their first baby. We talked about his future. She told us about the school he would go to, a French immersion school close to their house, the same one my brother-in-law had gone to. We talked about all the sports he would play; definitely hockey, and the instruments they wanted him to learn.

The weekend was of course, over before we knew it. As it always is when you're having fun. Home bound we were, only just to turn right back around again. She was in labour and headed to the hospital. He was ready to meet the world a little early! My mom and I headed to an empty house and let ourselves in. We waited and waited for hours, and no information was coming. I decided to take their dog, Topher, for a walk to calm my excitement. By this time of day it was starting to cool down, and a walk through the suburbs was just what I needed. When I got back to the house she phoned to let us know that she had been scheduled in for a cesarean section because the baby was breach and not in a good position for a natural birth. A little after 8:00pm, that July 4th, 2016, the brand new father called to let us know their son was born. They named him Cooper Edward Williams. They described him to us having beautiful, bright tufts of blonde hair. Unfortunately for me and my hyperactivity about having a new nephew, they let us know that they weren't going to be let out of the hospital until for at least 24 hours and the doctors said we couldn't visit anymore that night. So, the next day to keep us busy until noon when we would head to the hospital, Mom, myself, and Mike's mother and sister cleaned the house until it was pristine. We set up the play pen, and folded up all the baby clothes that had been given to them at their baby shower just weeks earlier. The dog was put outside. The house was now ready for a brand new baby, aside from the mess of an unfinished home improvement project.

We successfully made it to the hospital and rode the large elevator up, up, and away. We found

their room and crept in. Directly in front of us sat Mike, looking up with tired yet happy eyes. On the bed laid my beautiful sister, smiling away. The tears streamed down my cheeks as I gave them both proud hugs and made my way over to the bassinet where my very tiny, blonde, three week premature nephew lay sleeping, snuggled into a million blankets. My mom gently picked him up, holding him up securely, for me to see. His face, a bit yellow in skin tone, was familiar. Not familiar in the sense that he had Mike's prominent features, or my sister Lisa's high cheek bones, but familiar in that he looked much like the individuals I had seen greeting shoppers into Walmart. His eyes were slanted upwards, his nose was tiny and triangular, and his features were flattened. My nephew looked like he had Down Syndrome. To this day, I hope my smile never wavered, I hope the confusion and concern on my face didn't show. I made my mom quickly give him up, so I could snuggle him close. He slumped into my arms, as floppy as ever, needing full support. I brushed this off as being a symptom of being born three weeks early. The longer I stared at his face, the less prominent the characteristics of Down Syndrome were. The feeling in my stomach slowly dissipated. Cooper doesn't have Down Syndrome, I thought, there's no way. Soon after we arrived, Mike's mom and dad showed up, to take a look at their first grandchild. When I passed little Cooper off to Mike's mother Debbie, the conversation between her and my mom began. The grandmothers argued about who Cooper looked like more, Mike or Lisa. They both said they could find no similarities in Cooper to any of their own babies. The knot reappeared in my stomach.

The day went on, and finally my dad, and my other sisters and brothers-in-law showed up from out of town to meet Cooper. The room filled up quickly with family and friends, so out of respect, people retreated to the waiting room so Lisa could nurse. My mom and I stayed with my sister Lisa, like she asked us to, as she nursed her newborn son. It was only the three of us in the room. A lanky, bald man who was clearly in a hurry, quickly paced into the room, sat down, and began talking. Lisa looked worried and hurriedly asked me to go find Mike, and leave the room. I let Mike know there was a man there to talk to them, and sat down with the rest of my family in the waiting room, the knot in my stomach growing larger. A long while passed until my mother and I finally decided to go to their room again. As we walked in, I could instantly tell something was wrong. I felt my stomach drop

I looked into Mike's tearful and red eyes, and quickly turned to Lisa who was looking down into the eyes of her son. Without taking her eyes off him, Lisa slowly began to break the news I already knew was coming. She said "the doctor believes Cooper has characteristics of Down Syndrome."

Mike began to sob in the corner as he heard these words again, but Lisa's eyes lovingly remained on her son, softly fingering his chubby cheek. I didn't know then if it was bravery or shock, but Lisa did not cry. My mom and I made our way to Mike and Lisa's empty home in silence. Topher greeted us excitedly as we stepped into their partially renovated house. I walked down the stairs into the basement where I would be sleeping and caught a glance of the couch and coffee table that we had played board games on just a couple days prior, when Lisa was still pregnant. I crashed onto my knees and began to bawl, hysterically. I thought shameful thoughts. I cried for the normalcy we had when we giggled and played games and ate chocolate covered almonds

and fuzzy peaches on the couch. I cried in confusion, I cried in anger. I mostly cried because I didn't want my best friend, and Mike, to be sad. I didn't want them to feel sad during one of the happiest moments of their life. I kept begging God to give them joy during this time. I needed them to be happy.

The next morning I took Topher for another walk, and made a welcome home sign for Cooper and his parents. I wanted to do as much as I could to instill happiness. Around 9:00pm the three of them arrived home. We sat down and talked about the elephant in the room, as I held the oh so snuggly baby boy. Lisa explained to us what the lanky, bald man had told them. He was a geneticist. And with very little people skills, he delved into a negative run down of what their future would bring. He told them about the increased risk of leukemia, immune dysfunction, epilepsy, congenital heart disease, thyroid issues and mental problems associated with Down Syndrome. He told them that individuals with Down Syndrome almost always developed hearing, eyesight, and speaking problems, as well as die at an early age and develop Alzheimer's guaranteed. He did not give them a glimmer of hope. By the time Cooper was just 17 hours old, he had already been booked in for various blood and heart tests, kidney screenings, and hearing tests.

My sister swooped her son out of my arms, held him close to her chest and whispered "But it's all going to be okay." Cooper was not yet officially diagnosed with Trisomy 21, we still had to wait for his results to come back. But it seemed to me that no matter what was to happen, Lisa was going to be able to handle it. She treated Cooper as a baby, that's what he was. His diagnosis wouldn't change that.

As Mike and his dad were busy finishing up the home renovations one afternoon shortly after Coopers birth, Lisa explained to us that the news was very hard for Mike to handle. He felt as though their dreams had been dashed. Would Cooper be able to go to a French immersion school? Would he be able to play sports or instruments? Would he ever be an independent human being, who could raise a family of his own? This is the first time I saw Lisa breakdown. She was not upset because her son may not be able to do these things. It didn't matter, as long as he was happy and healthy. What shook her was the pain Mike was feeling. She didn't want him to be sad. Through the hustle and bustle of the first few days after Cooper's birth, Lisa seemed perfectly content. She admitted to being afraid of what the future might bring, should Cooper develop any major health problems. Her courage, and her love for Cooper shone through her fear. I was astonished with her bravery. I wondered if perhaps she was still in shock from the news of having a baby with special needs. But she didn't crack. Cooper's 47th chromosome to her only meant there was more to love. From the moment the doctor told them about Cooper's potential diagnosis, the news was real to her, and she was okay with that.

I have always admired my big sister. I have always believed she was the bravest person to ever live. When my sisters and I were little and she babysat us , she wasn't afraid of going into the basement. When she took me to the theatre to see The Tale of Despereaux and she wasn't afraid to drive into town. Even when she moved to the big city, and went to university. She was brave, I always thought. I wanted to be just like her when I grew up. Now, and since the day Cooper was

born, I've never been more amazed at her incredible courage. I've never been more proud. It takes a lot of bravery not to be afraid of 'bad guys' hiding in the basement when you're home alone, or to learn to drive, or to move away from home and go to university. It takes a lot of courage, to hear that your son has Down Syndrome, and be the rock that she was, and still is, for not only her son, but her husband, and herself.

When I opened the cover of this exam booklet to see that the topic this year was 'Courage', it took me less than two seconds to figure out what I would write about. The most courageous person I know; my big sister, my best friend, the mother of my Godson and homie with an extra chromie.”