

Leukemia battle gives Tyson chance to know hero



Louisburg High School senior Christopher Tyson poses with a picture of his great-grandfather Kenneth Virgin at the Punchbowl National Cemetery in Hawaii where his grandfather's name is honored at a memorial. Tyson is currently battling leukemia and was given a Make-A-Wish opportunity. He chose to go to Pearl Harbor where he got to see his grandfather's name for himself.

In 2013, Christopher Tyson sat down to write about his hero – a man he had never met.

It was for a school project, and a pretty big one actually. Christopher, then a sophomore at Louisburg High School, was charged by band director John Cisetti to write a paper about a veteran in his family as the band prepared to travel to New York City to march in the annual Memorial Day parade.

Christopher's great-grandfather, Kenneth Virgin, was one of 34 sailors that was killed on the USS Colhoun during the battle for Okinawa in World War II. He heard stories about his grandfather from his mother, Rhonda.

No doubt, the paper took Christopher back in time wondering what it was like to serve in the military at a time filled

with tension and loss of life. It was hard for him to fathom what his great grandfather went through.

Christopher finished his project, traveled with the LHS Marching Band and did his best to honor him by playing his trombone through the streets of New York City.

Less than a year later, Christopher would go through a battle of his own. It was one that didn't involve war, guns or conflict.

It was a personal battle – for his life.

GOD'S GOT THIS

At the beginning of his junior year, Christopher joined the rest of his Louisburg High School cross country teammates for a little running.

The season was just getting underway with the first day of practice, and right away Christopher could tell something wasn't right.

"I went for two miles and I could just feel the pulse pounding inside my head and I was just exhausted the whole time," he said.

The next day, the same thing happened.

On the third day, he ran with Wildcat coach John Reece, and pretty quickly Reece realized something wasn't right.

"I didn't notice anything at first with Christopher because it was very hot and everybody was struggling," Reece said. "The thing that I noticed was him not finishing the workout. When I talked to him he told me he had been sick with the flu while visiting family.

"I mentioned to his mom that his skin color was off and that

it might not hurt to have a doctor check him out again since he had just gotten over the flu.”

That afternoon, Rhonda and Christopher went to a walk-in clinic in Paola and the doctors didn’t notice much. They drew some of his blood and told them they would give them a call in a day or two when the results came back.

It turned out to be a lot shorter than that.

“We went to Walmart and weren’t there for 15 minutes before we got a call back from the doctor and said that he was anemic and all three of his blood counts were low,” Rhonda said. “He really wanted us to go see a doctor at Children’s Mercy the next day. He told us not to let Christopher do anything.”

The Tysons eventually made their way up to Children’s Mercy and got the result no child or parent wants to hear – it was cancer. More specifically, Christopher was diagnosed with pre-B-cell leukemia, which is a cancer of the bone marrow and blood.

If there was any good news in the diagnosis it was that doctors told the family his pre-B-cell numbers were the best of anyone they have ever seen and it was the earliest they had ever caught it.

After talking with the doctors and telling her of the diagnosis, Rhonda looked at her son, who was lying the hospital bed joking around after having a bone marrow pull done – not exactly the reaction most people have after an invasive procedure is done.

She looked at him and asked how he was doing.

“Mom, God’s got this,” Christopher told her.

“I hope so Christopher,” Rhonda said. “Because my world is just spinning right now.”

It was spinning enough that Rhonda and her husband Roger didn't bother to tell Christopher of his diagnosis, on accident, of course. The two figured the doctors had told him of the news.

"He said he didn't find out about it till the next day when he overheard us talking to the doctors about it," Rhonda said. "I felt pretty small as a parent when he told me. I just assumed that when he said 'God's got this' that he knew what God had."

Through it all, Christopher wasn't worried much. He had faith, knowing that God would get him through this one way or another.

His faith was tested right away.

BEATING CANCER

Shortly after being diagnosed with leukemia, Christopher aggressively began chemotherapy treatments.

Every Friday, he made his way up to Children's Mercy for chemo and would spend days in the hospital over the next few months. It wasn't long before he started feeling the effects.

After returning home from a treatment one day, Christopher couldn't move the whole left side of his body.

"We thought he was having a stroke," Rhonda said.

By the time they got back up to the hospital, Christopher couldn't move at all. His father, Roger, pulled him out of the car and carried him into the hospital.

As Christopher lay in the hospital bed, there wasn't much Rhonda could do so she went home with her daughter.

"I went home later that night and I just prayed and asked God how we were going to take care of him," Rhonda said. "I was

just so scared. Then I go back up about six hours later and I see him walking in the hallway with the nurse. That was a miracle as far as I was concerned because I know the kind of shape he was in when I left.

Doctors took an MRI and found a white spot in the middle of his brain. It wasn't a stroke, but Christopher was suffering from methotrexate toxicity. He was allergic to methotrexate they were giving him during chemotherapy treatments.

They gave him medicine to help counteract some of the reactions, one of which was over-the-counter Delsym cough medicine, of all things.

The treatments continued and so did the reactions. Even with all that, Christopher wasn't about to miss one of the highlights of his year – the LHS Marching Band Electric Light Show.

"I really enjoy marching band and the sports I am in," Christopher said. "I just wanted to get back out there."

Just a little more than a month after the diagnosis, Christopher put on his marching band outfit, laced with lights and tried to get back to some form of normalcy. The chemo would wear on him, however.

He had a lumbar puncture the day before his performance and suffered from a major headache that made it difficult to even stand up.

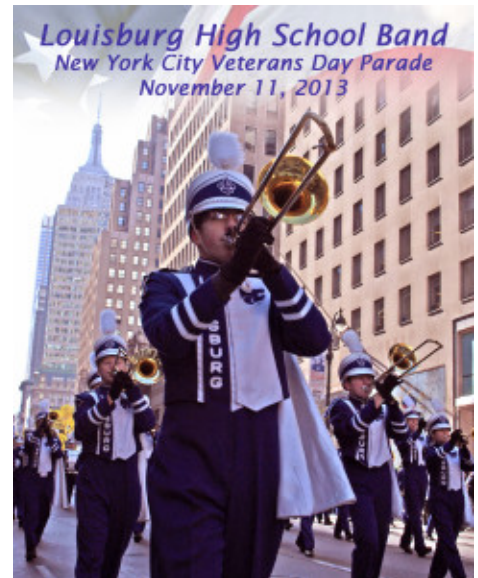
"He was laying down in the truck and when they were ready to go in, he went out and did his thing," Rhonda said. "Then he came back and laid down in the truck again as we were trying to get all the lights off him."

It was enough to raise the eyebrows of his band teacher.

"I did not expect Christopher to be there that night, but I was not surprised because I know that Christopher is dedicated

beyond belief,” Cisetti said. “He has a keen sense of loyalty to the group and goes the extra mile for his classmates.”

Christopher also made an appearance at the Wildcats’ home cross country meet in October. He watched as his team ran with orange ribbons on their uniform in honor of his fight against leukemia.



Christopher Tyson made the cover of the LHS Marching Band book as they marched through New York City in the Labor Day Parade back in 2013.

“Christopher is an awesome kid,” Reece said. “He is a hard worker both in and out of school. While he was going through the first stages of treatment, he was often more worried about school than what he was going through.

“He wanted to be back in school with his peers and be as close to normal as he could be. His body worked hard to put his leukemia in to remission. He is a warrior and he put his faith in God to help him get through this difficult time.”

He had plenty of classmates and teachers to help him get through the difficult times. Early on, Cisetti brought a little present to cheer him up – something from that special day in New York City.

“I told the band parents on our photography committee that I wanted a good picture of one of our band students marching in front of a famous landmark,” Cisetti said. “As it turned out, Christopher is the one they got in a picture in front of the Empire State Building. When I made the souvenir trip book, that picture went on the front. The books arrived from the publisher the same week that Christopher got sick. When I visited him in the hospital, I took him the very first copy.”

The book brought back a lot of great memories for Christopher, one of which was of his great grandfather.

MAKE-A-WISH

While in the hospital, Christopher was told he would be granted a wish through the Make-A-Wish Foundation.

The foundation provides sick children with the opportunity to go somewhere with their family, meet a famous athlete or celebrity or anything a child would want to do.

They told Christopher to start thinking about where he would want to go. It didn't take him long to answer.

“Pearl Harbor,” he said.

Everyone's eyes perked up.

“He told them he wanted to go to Pearl Harbor and not Hawaii, which puts a whole different spin on it,” Roger said.

He wasn't thinking about the sunny skies, the blue ocean or the sandy beaches, Christopher was thinking about one thing –

his great-grandfather. He wanted to go see his grandfather's name that is engraved on the wall at Punchbowl National Cemetery, which is a tribute to the soldiers killed in the 20th century wars.

Christopher was eventually granted his wish as it was revealed following a service at their church in Olathe. The Make-A-Wish foundation provided him, his parents and a sister the opportunity to spend a week in Hawaii.

The only problem was Christopher had two sisters, so the church raised money for both of his sisters, Ashley and Emily, to go and the whole family took off for Hawaii in late July.

It was a memorable trip for the entire Tyson clan.

Their hotel was right on Waikiki Beach, and their room on the top floor of the Sheraton featured views from two balconies and had multiple flat-screen televisions.



Christopher Tyson stands next to the USS Bowfin during his tour of Pearl Harbor.

"We didn't turn those on once," Rhonda said.

After doing some touring of the islands, they made their way to Pearl Harbor where they toured the USS Arizona memorial and

then took a tour of the USS Bowfin, Christopher's favorite spot, before finishing up with the USS Missouri.

"We were able to go into the captain's cabin, barber shop and the brig and those were some of the spots that people usually don't get to go to," Christopher said of the Missouri. "It was a pretty awesome."

A couple days later, the family finally made their way to Punchbowl National Cemetery and Christopher was on the lookout for his grandfather's name. It was like looking for a needle in the haystack with the thousands of soldiers honored at the memorial.

With the help of a guide, he finally spotted it.

"Virgin, Kenneth D, Fireman IC, USNR, Kansas"

Christopher took out a piece of paper and rubbed the etching as keepsake to take back with him. As it turned out, finding his grandfather's name was just the beginning of a very special day.

Earlier in the day, the Tysons were informed they were invited to attend the disinterment of five coffins from four grave sites. It was a military exhumation process to help identify the remains of soldiers killed aboard the USS Oklahoma during the Pearl Harbor bombing of 1941.



Christopher Tyson (middle) stands with members of the military during the disinterment ceremony at Punchbowl National Cemetery.

As a part of the ceremony, Christopher was asked to be a part of the honors platoon. He stood next to a 2-star general and a member of the Pentagon.

"It was just really amazing to be a part of something like that," Christopher said.

When their day was coming to a close, Christopher got one more surprise. He was presented with the American flag that flew over Punchbowl on the day of their visit and was put in a frame.

The day capped what was an amazing getaway from their normal life that was filled with worries of leukemia and chemotherapy.

"The people with the Make-A-Wish Foundation are just amazing," Rhonda said. "They, along with all the sponsors that help kids get to experience these wonderful things is just awesome. For a lot of these kids, their wishes are just a light for them to look at what sometimes is at the end of a very long tunnel."

For Christopher, that light is getting brighter every day.

Getting back to normal

The Tyson family received good news a month after Christopher's diagnosis. All the chemotherapy he received was paying off as they eliminated 99.9 percent of the cancer.

Christopher will now be in maintenance for the next two years to make sure all of the cancer is gone. Currently, he goes in for chemo once a month and takes medication.

He will also have to go in for yearly checkups the rest of his life. However, Christopher and his family are more than thrilled with the result thanks to some divine help.

"Anything can happen," Rhonda said. "But you just have to put your faith and trust in God and hold on."

It was a wild ride that came full circle. It started as a homework assignment for a trip to New York City and ended in Hawaii – the place where Christopher got to see where his grandfather, his hero, was honored.

Sandwiched in the middle, Christopher found out a lot about himself and his faith in God. Through all the hardships, he admitted he never wavered.

"God's got this," Christopher said. "He always has."