

Life is not fair. We do not always get what we want when we want it, we do not always get our way, and we all know that. On the other hand, we do expect some things to remain constant – most prominently: the people in our lives. Most young people don't know what it is like to go to sleep one night, and wake up to find they no longer have a person who has dramatically changed them. Unfortunately, I do know what that is like.

In the fall of 2004 I was beginning my freshman year at Highland Park High School, and my friend Willie should have been beginning his freshman year at the University of Texas. Willie had been a fixture in the youth department of my church for years and had recently graduated from the high school I was now entering. His friends were heading off to college but unfortunately, Willie had to stay behind. You see Willie had been diagnosed with osteosarcoma (a rare form of bone cancer) during high school. He had gone through grueling treatments and difficult surgery. Things looked up for awhile, but when the cancer came back, it was with a vengeance, and it interrupted his plans. So as his friends left for school, Willie stayed in Dallas and agreed to be part of the band for the junior high worship service at our church. That was where I really got to know him.

I had also been asked to be a part of the band, but even though I loved to sing, I was pretty intimidated. All but one of the other members had graduated high school, and the one that hadn't was a senior. As I walked down the stairs to the "youth basement" to lead music for the first time, self doubt crept into my mind - I would be the youngest and most inexperienced person in the band. However, when I entered the youth room, my insecurities began to fade. Willie walked up to me and introduced himself with his great big smile. I learned that he would be singing with me through the year. As we rehearsed the song for that evening, "Shout to the Lord", I broke away from the melody and harmonized. Willie gave me a surprised look, but as we continued to sing I saw that smile again. After the song ended, Willie came and found me and complimented me on my unexpected harmony. We continued to talk, mostly about music, until the junior high youth arrived.

Over the next few months my friendship with Willie continued to grow. Every Wednesday we talked and sang together. I was just an insecure high school freshman, but he always encouraged me to try new things with my voice. He gave me the confidence to step out and sing alone at times and told me I was "good". I struggled with my theater class, so at band rehearsal times he helped me with my lines. He told me not to give up - no matter how hard things might seem.

Toward the end of those months things took a sharp turn. Metastatic tumors had been found in Willie's lungs and I remember thinking, "How can this be? How could something so horrible happen to someone so great?" But I watched Willie and what I saw truly changed me. Willie kept going, kept singing and kept smiling. His music became both a motivating and healing force in his life. I remembered what Willie told me when he was helping me with my lines, and I knew he wouldn't give up.

As I continued through high school I tried to do what Willie did; pursuing my passions and dreams. I kept up with theater, even though it was hard at the start. I found that each time I was in a musical or play, I felt more confident so that by the time I was in the senior play it was actually fun! Music became my inspiration for life and I found that as I participated in more types of music, my love for it only grew. Like Willie, I used music to help me through the tough times and found that singing and playing the piano kept me going. When my grandfather died I found that song writing helped me to deal with the pain. Because of the power that music and the arts have had in my life, I plan to study music education and vocal performance in college. Like Willie did for me, I want to inspire others to find beauty in life through music and the arts.

After having treatment for the lung tumors, Willie finally got to head off to the University of Texas one year late, and I was so happy to see him achieve that dream. During spring break of that next year I went on a mission trip to Juarez, Mexico with my church – a trip Willie had taken numerous times. On the Wednesday of that trip a call came in telling us that Willie had left us in the early hours of that morning.

As I said earlier: life is just not fair.

Willie taught me so much about life and love. He taught me to live for the moment and to make the most of every opportunity. He taught me to love everyone, whether I like them or not. Even though he isn't here physically, I know he will always be with me in my heart inspiring me to keep going, keep singing, keep smiling, and to NEVER give up.