

Introduction

Proving Them Wrong

"Never allow what they say about you to define you. They said you would not see two years old, that you would be mentally retarded, and with no teeth, you should not be able to blow a trumpet!"

- Ida Magee

But God... The moment that I was able to read and comprehend what was going on inside my body, I realized that my one in one million rare genetic disorder was my opportunity to prove every highly credentialed medical and educational professional unequivocally *wrong*! I was born with cleidocranial dysostosis; *cleido* refers to collarbone, *cranial* means the head, and *dysostosis* is the formation of abnormal bone. This rare disorder affects each person differently, yet the main things we all have in common is that we don't have a collarbone, teeth, and our skull development and facial growth usually appears larger than normal. Neither of my biological parents has my disorder, and there is a 50/50 chance that my children will have it.

Not only did I have physical limitations at birth, but I also had life-threatening respiratory challenges and was often hospitalized. The majority of my doctors provided a negative diagnosis and said that I would not be more than a vegetable and unable to

completely develop mentally. Of course, there were the visible complications of my enlarged head, with a big soft spot at the top and my two clavicles were not developed. I have had hundreds of doctor visits and countless surgeries up until I was 18.

I was placed in the Ohio foster care system at four months old and into the home of Ida Magee. She was a deeply religious woman, big in stature and tough, yet with the biggest heart imaginable. At first, she was intimidated by me because I literally had strings attached. There were all types of wires, heart monitors, and equipment connected to me. Not to mention two or three doctors appointments each week.

Throughout my elementary years, I was an introvert. I was just different. Imagine having to wear a white astronaut-like helmet during gym class. I was bullied and teased. The name calling was endless: marshmallow head, heart-head, and E.T., to name a few that were kind. Most of the bullying happened outside of the teachers' earshot, so there was not much I could do. I often came home and told others what happened and many got mad and wanted to retaliate on my behalf. My mother, on the other hand, was of the mindset that I had to stand up for myself. "It's your problem, you handle it. Be a man and handle your own problems and issues," she advised.

My mother, Ida Magee, legally adopted me at 14 years old. The legal battle was arduous because my biological mother was somewhat in the picture, yet she had her own personal challenges to deal with. There were always other foster kids in my home. In 30 years, my mother fostered over 130 kids in the Trumbull County Children's Services Bureau. Even though she only had a second-grade education, she raised all of us to be people of character and respect. Many of my foster siblings are working

professionals in medicine, education, politics, and technology fields. Despite growing up in a house full of people, I was very content keeping to myself. I spent more time listening and observing adults than I did speaking. At a young age, I desperately wanted to be an adult and did not waste time doing kid stuff.

I enjoyed every moment being a Boy Scout and envisioned my adult life as a Scout leader. I had no idea that my life's calling would stem from my purchase of a \$25 trumpet at a yard sale when I was in sixth grade. It was a family friend's trumpet and it was sitting in their attic for years. They found out that I was interested in learning to play and wanted me to have it for a small fee since the original owner spent about \$500 for it. I cleaned it up with a sponge and Dawn Dishwashing Liquid and was instantly hooked! I spent all of my down time learning and practicing knots from the Boy Scout Handbook, playing trumpet and positioning myself within earshot or blending into the woodwork listening to adult conversations.

Nearly two decades later, I am the Director of Bands and Student Leadership Development at a para-military college. I encourage and empower college students each day. My love of music and helping others is what drives me. Looking back, it's as if my life was written as a four-part symphony all along. Each movement in my life was an emotional challenge that required a different thought process and perspective to grow into the next phase.

I am proof that despite many physical setbacks, if you have a big enough *WHY*, no matter how many tough blows or obstacles life sends your way, you can achieve your dreams. By starting with self-leadership, then a keen focus, and determination, all

coupled with faith, you can beat any medical or societal odds hands down! For every tough blow, I encourage you to Get T.O.U.G.H!

Be	T enacious
Seek	O pportunities
Embrace	U nity
Engage	G roups
Ask for	H elp

FIRST MOVEMENT

Allegro

Birth - Elementary

Calling all prayer warriors...

CHAPTER 1

Touched By an Angel

*“Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you,
Before you were born, I set you apart...”*
- *Jeremiah 1:5 (NIV)*

It’s hard to believe that as I write this, I can’t help but think about the words the doctors repeatedly told my foster mother at the time, after every emergency room visit, “Ms. Magee, he’s not going to live past age two, and if he does, he will have severe disabilities.” My mentor, Jerry Allen, and others, often told me stories of how at six months old, I was the size of an average man’s palm. I was the tiniest human being my mom, or anyone close to her had ever seen. I was connected to a heart monitor 24/7 and I had several tubes and wires coming out of me from every opening. Everyone was afraid to pick me up or gently touch me. The stress of the heart monitor, combined with my biological mother’s mental health issues and lack of other family support, was the primary reason I was placed into foster care.

My foster mom was a strong woman of faith. She was steadfast in believing God's Word over the doctor's word. Mom was always praying for the children in her care, the church, her family and extended family. She surrounded herself with people of faith. That's how she connected with my mentor, Mr. Jerry Allen. Mom was friends with Mrs. Vilma Allen from the church. She attended a church banquet and was seated with Mr. and Mrs. Allen. Mr. Allen was a deacon and head of the children's Sunday School. The banquet speaker talked about one of the ten plagues God put on Egypt because Pharaoh refused to let God's people out of bondage. This specific plague was of countless frogs in everyone's home day and night. No one in Egypt could escape them nor have peace from the sounds of "ribbit." They were pests! It was under the plague of the frogs that Pharaoh promised to let the Israelites go, but he later recanted. It was my mother's wit and sense of humor to use the speaker's words to start comedic trouble with those seated around her.

After the speaker took his seat, my mother humorously said to Mr. Allen, "would you be my frog"? Out of respect for her, he responded, "Yes Ma'am," and chuckled. Mom then replied, "sounds like a frog to me!" From that day forward, Mr. Allen and my mom became the best of friends and the "frog warfare" began. They plagued each other with frogs for over 30 years. Frog plush toys, ceramic objects, and greeting cards were

all strategically delivered to each other's homes for holidays, birthdays and any other occasion, just to keep the "frog warfare" going. My mother called him "Mr. JD Frog" and he called her "Mrs. Froggie." Together they were a force to be reckoned with as friends fighting spiritual battles in prayer. Their first battle was waged when they teamed up to fight in prayer and support for my survival.

I was described as fragile, tiny and fetal-looking in appearance. Physically handling me was intimidating because the alarms of my heart monitor were always going off. Mr. Allen said that I was the first little baby he had seen hanging in the balance between life and death. He often prayed that I would have a normal life despite my debilitating complications. Even though he was apprehensive, scared and worried about what my mom would say, he came by and picked me up every chance he could. His large hands always got tangled in my wires.

Mr. Allen recalls being there for a visit when my heart stopped. He rode in the ambulance as the paramedics resuscitated me. I was in the hospital for a few days, and the gravity of my condition weighed heavily on my mom and others. When I pulled through, my mom asked Mr. Allen to say a special prayer for me. He wrapped me in a blanket and took me to the corner of the living room, which was off limits for all the other kids in the house. It was a special room in the house for guests. The room that all the kids knew as "the clean room."

He prayed for me like never before. He said that through those wires he sensed and felt a connection between us. It was electric. It was very real for him. He felt that God was speaking to him to be a blessing to me. God answered Mr. Allen's prayers. In only a few weeks, I started drinking my milk vigorously. I became more alert, stronger and determined to live.

Mr. Allen came by to feed me and pick me up. He felt obligated in his heart and took out time from his own family to play with me, touch me, and do whatever he could because he was still unsure if I was going to make it past my second birthday. His wife Vilma, prayed for me as well. They were a real team. Mr. Allen even attended doctors visits and listened to the negative words they spoke over my life about me being a vegetable and not completely developing. During those early moments, my mom asked him to be my mentor; a God-father of sorts. Out of admiration and respect for her, he agreed. Like my mother, he was always worried about my enlarged head with a big soft spot on top. I also had respiratory problems and was prone to year-round colds. Mr. Allen was by my side as often as he could be. He fixed things around the house and helped out the other kids as well.

Each birthday after my second birthday is truly a blessing from God. It's as if He tapped me on the shoulder and said, "Wayne, I've got you. Keep believing in me and keep reading my Word." I grew stronger with each passing year.

A Hedge of Protection

Before I could walk, I wore a helmet so that I would not injure or irritate my head as it was still developing. I didn't let the helmet stop me. I learned to walk pretty quickly and was very active. My mom wanted to get me off the bottle as soon as possible. One day Mr. Allen came by and she cooked turnip greens and cornbread. She took the pot liquor from the turnip greens and sprinkled the cornbread in a bowl and he fed it to me. In no time, I started growing and began to fit in with some of the other children my age.

I loved the outdoors and my mom had a huge back yard. I roamed around picking up rocks, twigs, leaves and anything interesting I could find. I rode my tricycle full speed and would hit the same turn and fall off. That was my idea of fun. Everyone stood around to watch me hit that turn and fall over and over again. There was always an audience as my mom fostered several children during my childhood and as an adult. I also had Hot Wheels and earth movers that kept me busy. Despite years of respiratory setbacks, chronic ear infections and several ear surgeries, and a host of other problems that stumped the doctors at the Cleveland Clinic and Akron Children's Hospital, my faith grew stronger. My confidence in my abilities increased. I was beginning to feel whole. My two guardian angels, my mom, and Mr. Allen, never gave up on their assignment to nurture me and I began to flourish physically and mentally.

*"Have you noticed that as strong as God is,
and as powerful as He is, when He speaks,
it's with a whisper. The children always
listen better when you whisper."
-Tess, Touched by an Angel*

Once I learned to read, I definitely grew wiser. Everyone in our house had to go to church. My mother believed wholeheartedly in God. Whenever I was allowed to be off the heart monitor, I was in church. I loved going to church. It made me feel special, somewhat unique from all the other kids. It was as if God was specifically talking to me in the Scriptures. He knew and understood me like no one else. I soaked up the words of the Bible in my spirit day and night and felt like a grown-up at a young age.

I begged my mother to take me out of the children's church so I could be in regular church with adults who understood the Bible like me. I viewed all of the activities in the children's church were just too playful. I didn't want to play, color, or recite only one or two lines of Scripture. There was this sense of urgency in me. I had no time to play. I was on a special assignment from God.

CHAPTER 2

A Different World

"Tell me and I forget. Teach me and I remember. Involve me and I learn."

- Benjamin Franklin

Early on, I was placed in the Fairhaven Program of Trumbull County for children and adults with learning disabilities. I literally rode the little yellow school bus to Fairhaven School. Lunch was provided and I remember there were always a lot of activities involving food like pajama day with movies and popcorn or ice cream sundaes.

The structure of a school was more focused on life skills. I actually found the Fairhaven School more entertaining than challenging. Although my mother was very protective, she instilled life skills to me on a daily basis. So a lot of what they were teaching in school, I was already getting at home. I even took my *McGee & Me*, Christian animated Bible stories on VHS with me to school and was a mini-preacher. I wanted other kids to hear about Christ.

I recall around the first or second grade being moved to the Liberty local public school K-4 grade building. A teacher took me out of my classroom and said, "We're going to get you more help. Come with me." I was escorted out of the regular classroom

and put in learning disabilities classes with other kids in my grade. I was given the same class work for the most part but allowed more time to finish. I was also given further academic assistance. The switching classes quickly became boring to me. I could do the work, but I wasn't excited about going because now that I was older, my peers teased me for going to "LD", learning disabilities classes. Not to mention the teasing because of the large white helmet I wore every day at recess or gym class.

My mom always wanted me to be tough. She knew I would face obstacles and she wanted me to be prepared sooner than later. She constantly told me that she was never going to come to school to fight my battles unless I was being abused. A few times she told me that whatever the teacher tells her about me, she will believe the teacher's version over mine.

Around that same time, I liked watching the show "A Different World." One of the main characters, Dwayne Wayne, was played by Kadeem Hardison. I thought his flip-up sunglasses were very cool. He had a similar character name to mine. One day I decided that I wanted to change my name from "Wayne" to "Dwayne." So on of all my exams, seat work, and homework, I wrote "Dwayne," followed by my last name. I did this for what seemed to be a week or two and then one teacher finally confronted me about it. I told her that I wanted to change my name because I liked "Dwayne" better. "Well, I think Wayne is just as nice. So going forward, you will be Wayne in my class," she said.

Thinking back on this seemingly harmless decision was my way of coping with having the same first name as my biological father. I knew that he did not want me or even claim that I was his son. He made it clear that he did not want anything to do with

a “retarded little baby.” Deep down, I wanted to rid myself of his name and take on the name of a black character, who I thought was cool and funny on TV. The next Christmas I begged for those flip-up sunglasses. I got my wish. Needless to say, they did not make it to summer before they broke because of my ill-care of them.

Growing up in Liberty township, a suburb of Youngstown, Ohio, holidays and celebrations were always in full swing. Most of my teachers were Jewish, therefore Jewish holiday traditions were taught in the classroom. I learned to make potato latkes and played with dreidels during Hanukkah. I even went to the bar and bat mitzvah celebrations in my teens.

My least favorite time of year in Youngstown was Halloween. The town went all out to make its events scarier than the year before. I dreaded Halloween every year for 12 years! I just don’t like scary things. Everyone on the bus ride to school wore masks and costumes. I rode with my eyes closed. I couldn’t even eat lunch that day as I was scared to see something that would upset my eyes and stomach. One time, a couple of kids with devil and monster costumes, cornered me on the bus to force me to look at them. They knew I was scared. I crammed myself between the seats on the bus with my head wedged down. They could not get me to look at them until it was time to get off at school.

Miracle in Ohio

*“We are not human beings on a spiritual journey.
We are spiritual beings on a human journey.”*

- Stephen Covey

As I got older, I didn't mind that my birthday was overlooked since it was so close to Christmas and everyone was in full holiday mode. I was born on December 20th. It's no coincidence that the foundation of my life has been shaped by the Scriptures and the real reason for the holiday season. I really liked the idea of being treated like an adult at only eight years old and was more than happy to take on household chores. On my birthdays, we made homemade German chocolate cake, pound cake with sugar frosting or a 7-up cake.

By this time, my adoptive mother was in her late 60s, so I helped make the cake. She instructed me to bring everything she needed to the kitchen table: blender, butter, eggs, flour, sugar, lemon extract, and her beloved, vanilla extract. She sat at the table and put everything together. My job was to put the cake in the oven and set the timer. She kept a watchful eye on it and did not leave the kitchen until it was done.

I have always been a workhorse. I enjoyed doing anything to help make my mother's day easier, including house cleaning, laundry, and even balancing her checkbook. I also did yard work and took care of things around the house that I learned how to do from Mr. Allen. I was the head bottle washer in the house and became the lead instructor to the new kids that came in the house. For nearly 15 years, I was the top sous chef in the house. I helped plan, prep and prepare all the meals from the age of eight until I left home to move to Massachusetts at 23. I mastered southern and Italian cuisine and still enjoy cooking for others.

Scouts' Honor

"On my honor, I will do my best to do my duty to God and my country... "
- BSA Scout Oath

After two years of Cub Scouts, I joined the Boy Scouts at age 11. I wanted to do everything perfectly. Anything involving rope work, I was determined to master better than anyone in my entire troop. I studied and memorized the Scout Handbook and earned merit badges to advance each year. I was totally all in. Knots were something I became well known for in my troop because I was exceptional at it; the square knot, the granny knot, the slip knot and the bowline knot, which is a life-saving knot that I could actually tie with one hand. One of the Assistant Scout Masters' who was the township's Fire Chief, challenged me to a duel nearly every time he saw me. It was a duel to see who could tie the bowline knot the fastest. Armed with his rope and both of us at the ready, on the count of three, the battle was on. I often won. Sometimes he beat me. I studied land and celestial navigation, swimming, CPR and first aid. It took anywhere from six months to a year to move up to another rank, and my aggressiveness to advance to the next badge was a constant goal. I am proud to say that I am honored to be an Eagle Scout and I take my oath seriously. Each day I try to live out the core Scouting values. The rank of "Eagle" is a lifelong commitment to self-leadership, as well as leadership in the family, community and the world.

The Great Escape

"Our greatest weakness is giving up. The most certain way to succeed is to try just one more time."

- Thomas A. Edison

I did everything I could to prove to the teachers and administrators that I did not belong in learning disabilities classes for the rest of my life. I created extra credit assignments in math, reading, and science each week. I studied the dictionary and wrote down as many *big* words as I could and begged the teachers to test me on their meaning. I remember seeing *Mary Poppins* for the first time. I was so impressed by the vocabulary words. I submitted a spelling test to my teachers from the words used in the movie. The first word on my list was "supercalifragilisticexpialidocious." I created tests for every subject. More often than not, I passed with flying colors. My mother and I fought tooth and nail to get me out of the program year-after-year. I was finally helmet free and released from learning disabilities classes in the eighth grade. Onward!