

Tribute to our Beloved Son, Asa

Many times we've been told how fortunate Asa and Mia are that we adopted them – that we are to be commended for our charity. However, we are very sure that we are the lucky ones and that somehow, from across the world, we were reunited as a family. We have always felt God's hand in our lives. Our unique family has been a profound blessing, joining us with two children that shine so brightly with love, wisdom and kindness. From the beginning and through the hardest of times, we've been surrounded by this light and the love of our extended family and friends. And while we are mired in our sorrow, we know grief is only possible because of deep love.

It was wonderful to be loved by "Ace" because his love had so many forms. In conversation, he was more attentive than anyone we've ever known. He would listen closely and compassionately. He gave great advice. He genuinely wanted to understand people and find commonality and connection. He often said that his disability made connection with others difficult, but no one tried harder to establish and nurture relationships. To our minds and based on the wonderful stories about Asa we've heard this past week, he was successful at making those around him feel loved.

Asa nurtured his relationship with us by being unfailingly kind and polite. We never had a meal for which he didn't thank us. His smile, humor and goodwill was contagious. Asa was concerned about our concerns as well as encouraging toward our endeavors. When his disabilities made many things difficult, we always worked together as a family to problem solve. He supported us as much as we supported him. We made a good team. We walked down our crooked path together with love and a lot of joy and laughter. It's hard to imagine our daily lives without him.

Asa was one of the most interesting and curious people we've ever known. His deep passion for learning, his ability to understand complex ideas and his steadfast values have taught us so much. He searched for nothing less than enlightenment and his journey was inspiring. From him we learned....

- Be comfortable being yourself – don't pretend to be someone else.
- Don't judge others because you don't know or understand their difficulties.
- Always meet rudeness with tolerance and compassion.
- Do not look away from someone's despair. Try to offer comfort.
- Respect people's interests and listen to their passions for they will always teach you something.
- Resilience requires superhuman strength.
- Try to find lessons in life's disappointments.

His courage and persistence in the face of adversity and suffering was remarkable.

Asa believed that family and friends are everything and that love can be big. During this past week we have felt Asa's presence surrounding us with this big love and assuring us that he is fine. In fact, he seems unencumbered, joyful and free. As we told him when he was small; we love you to the whole universe and back. We will miss you our beautiful boy, until God reunites us again as He did before. We pray that God's grace and peace sustains us until then.

Love, Mom and Dad

Tribute to My Brother

By Mia Brenneman

Dear Asa,
My big brother, My Say-sa
Who took his steps first, who walked when I crawled.
Where am I suppose to go with no one to follow?
What will I do with that part of me that waits for you.

No one will joke with me in the way you could, in a way that would only make us laugh, because it only made sense to us. Like the secret language we pretended to have when we were kids, so much of me only seems makes sense in the context of you. We are like two trees that grew so close together their trunks became intertwined.

When one of us is cut down how could it not be both of us?

You held me and so many up to the light, listen in a way no one else could, considering every nuance, and searched for understanding even when it was difficult for you. We would talk and fight to understand each other, stumbling through words that were a clumsy bridge between us.

Any new information you learned that you found helpful you wanted to impart on me. I will try to remember your words but I am scared of forgetting.

Sometimes people would say that I must feel older than you, like I am the big sibling, but to tell the truth I can't say that I did. How could I when I never knew anything else. You were always my big brother. It was always Asa and Mia. I don't want to be just Mia.

You showed me how to live through suffering, to fall down, and still stand up. And fall and stand and fall and stand. And fall... and somehow stand again.
And I will try to live up to that, as you would have wanted but Asa I don't know if I can.

But as you tell me even now, I have to stand up again. Even when I want to be caught in the undertow of despair and sorrow, you still are pulling me out of the waves. You will never let them take me.

You wanted me to hold my own bottle as a baby because you saw what I wanted when I didn't have words.

How can I be when you are a part of me. You were the one who spent late nights talking through vents with me, you who would not only play pretend with me but be in the same pretend world as me, you who would talk about the things grown ups didn't understand, you who kept my secrets and I yours.

Now you are dancing without end.
You get to be everything, the wind, the birds, the trees, the mountains, the waterfalls and the whole universe without pain. Or perhaps you are all the pain and all the joy all at once.

You are now in a place beyond my understanding, in the valley beyond the mountains, the hidden place. Wait for me brother.

I am with the part of you that stays with me, the part of you who loved me so hard and cherished me. My protector. A part of me is empty but waiting.

Tribute to Our Grandson

By Jim Brenneman

What I will remember most of Asa – and will cherish most – are the “one on one” discussions he had with me, or at times with both Grammy and me.

No matter what the topic – whether it be rocks, medical science or human behaviors – the amount of information and data that Asa offered into our discussions from his extensive knowledge and research - was overwhelming!

I guess, because of my diminishing memory, I jokingly would ask him – not only how he could learn all those details - but then also access them from his brain. He would give me that wonderful, broad Asa smile as I chuckled. I never will forget that warm smile!

Most every discussion would somehow lead us to the subject of our family and friends. Each time Asa clearly made his feelings and great appreciation known for the support he received from others, especially his parents - and Mia and Matt. His words were meaningful and convincing.

For me, this reenforced Asa’s ongoing caring he felt for all those he knew and loved – and even those who he did not know - but were in need.

Asa, Grammy and I will benefit from your love forever. Thank you – until we meet again.

Tribute to My Cousin

By Stephanie Metherall

My parents remember so vividly when they first met Asa. They've described it as seeing a piece of Laine and Steve's hearts made whole by Asa; that they were so incredibly happy when he came. That these new parents were so happy, not just to have a new baby, but this baby in particular.

Last summer, my brother Nicholas and I visited Vermont – one of Asa's favorite places. Asa proudly showed us his favorite things – kayaking, hiking, jet skiing, and simply tying our floats together in the water, talking and hoping we didn't stray too far from Steve (or Finn)'s watchful eye.

We went kayaking last summer – and the three of us stuck together. We went down to the south end of North Hero (confusing, I know), which got a little choppy. I was nervous – and Nicholas might not admit it, but I think he was too. Asa, on the other hand, had chosen the most difficult kayak to navigate. In part because he was showing off. In part because he wanted us – the landlubbers from Utah – to have the easy ones. In part because he knew he could keep an eye on us from there...and that mattered to him. In fact, whenever I got nervous, or was literally about to capsize, Asa was there – right alongside my big brother – the two of them keeping me safe. I know that's who he was to all of us – to Mia, his own little sister; to Laine and Steve, his parents; to Sean, his best friend; and to everyone else who knew him: invested in them and always nearby to help, listen...whatever they needed.

We talked about everything – skiing, boys, cheeseburgers (and how many would provide the optimal caloric intake for various exercise regimens), girls, tattoo history and culture, Costco dumplings, you name it. When I first became a lawyer, and I thought people were sick of hearing about it, there was Asa – asking for literal hours about the nuances of federal civil procedure.

One of the many topics we talked about that was so important to Asa – what it meant to be a good friend, a good person, and to lead a life worth living. I think he would be proud of what he accomplished in what little time he had – and I know my family feels so lucky to have been with him only weeks ago, to see that he had accomplished so very much.

When our family first met Asa, it was clear that he held a lot of space in the lives of those who knew him and loved him the most. And that's what makes this so hard. When someone is that invested in others, and you are that invested in them – when they fill such a huge part of someone's world, they leave an awfully big hole.

We love you, Ace. Thank you for being such an important part of our lives, and please promise you'll pick my next tattoo.

Love always, Uncle Jim, Aunt Anthea, Nicholas, and Stephanie

Like a Brother

By Jamie Murphy-Soika

Asa was a big brother to me. I had the fortune of growing up with him and he taught me so much—about cars, tattoos, and survival skills, but mostly how to be more observant of the world, how to stop and look, really look around, and how to go at your own pace and carve out your own life.

He was funny and bright and brilliant and fiercely protective. When Mia and I were younger, if he ever thought we were in danger—crossing the street, hiking on a root infested trail, or walking through a busy crowd in Burlington—he'd pull us close and hold on to our wrists, waiting for the danger to pass before proceeding on our way.

I tell this story often, but I think it truly highlights who Asa was. When he found out I was going to be living in North Philadelphia for college, the next time I saw him he gifted me a pocket knife to use "just in case." He made me promise to keep it in my apartment and I did for all three years I was in Philly. I still keep it with me.

Losing him has felt unreal, a cruel impossibility, and in these dark days since I've felt grief envelope me like a jacket.

Maybe it's because of how protective he was, but when I put on this jacket, and feel the weight of who we lost, I don't feel his absence.

With this jacket on he travels with me wherever I go.

So I wear my grief like a jacket. Not to weigh me down, but to wrap me up in his memory and to remind me of all of the lessons he's taught me over the years.

Asa was such a bright light, and in our grief jackets we will carry that light with us. It's the only way I know how.

I love and loved and will continue to love him and I'll miss him every day.