

THE ROANOKE TIMES

JAN.15, 2022

'We trusted him'

By Robert Anderson

FLOYD — Brian and Desirae Harman knew their son was sick.

Little Chance was a normal 4-year-old until the fall of 2006 when he was diagnosed with a stomach bug and strep throat.

Only this stomach bug was an odd one. Chance would run and play five or six days a week, but on the seventh day he might vomit all day long.

Brian Harman knew symptoms of acid reflux ran through his family. Maybe that was the answer, the young father wondered.

Chance's pattern continued, so his parents sought medical help for their son.

The family first consulted doctors in Roanoke, who delivered bad news.

Chance had a softball-sized brain tumor and would need surgery.

Their world turned upside down, Brian and Desirae, did not know where to turn.

They found help in the tight-knit mountain community of Floyd, where Brian has been the boys basketball coach at Floyd County High School since 2003.

The father of one of Harman's early players is a local dentist in town named Howard Cundiff.

He knew a friend who might be able to help.

Cundiff is a Virginia Military Institute graduate whose roommate in Lexington had gone on to become a doctor.

In the fall of 2007, Cundiff's friend was serving as a pediatric neurologist at Children's Hospital of the King's Daughters in Norfolk.

So phone calls were made. Discussions were held. Appointments were set.

And that's how Brian, Desirae and Chance Harman first met Dr. Ralph Northam.

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Northam leaves office Saturday as the 73rd governor of Virginia, but in late 2007 he had an even bigger job in the eyes of a family from Floyd.

Northam was Chance Harman's first pediatric cancer doctor.

In sports parlance, the outgoing governor was Brian Harman's go-to guy, and not just because Northam played basketball at long-gone Onancock High School on Virginia's Eastern Shore.

“He was our doctor the entire time,” Brian said “He was the communication guy with us. I could ask him questions that I couldn’t ask a regular doctor. He was that type of person. It was like me talking to you about basketball. He cared about what he did.”

A number of specialists treated Chance in Norfolk, where his condition had a name just as scary as the prognosis.

Chance had a rare medulloblastoma childhood brain growth called Atypical Teratoid Rhabdoid Tumor. Even before doctors knew it had metastasized to other parts of his body, there was less than a 10% hope of survival for a child Chance’s age.

After Chance underwent surgery in Norfolk, Desirae Harman heard words from the surgeon she never will forget.

“The best thing I can tell you is go home and take pictures. You’ve got about two weeks,” she recalled. “I said, ‘That’s not an option. We may not win this battle, but we’re going to fight this battle, and we’re going to let God sort it out.’”

In January, Harmans took Chance to to Duke University Children’s Hospital in North Carolina.

Dark days and endless nights were ahead.

Bunkered down for seven months in Durham, 135 miles from home and 185 miles from Norfolk, the Harmans still felt a close connection to Northham.

“We had no clue about that world we were going to face,” Desirae said. “Ralph kind of guided us and directed us, not just as a doctor but as a friend to us. We trusted him.

“He’d call in the middle of the night to check on us. He was just so compassionate.”

The Harmans needed a healthy dose.

After seven months at Duke, Chance died on July 6, 2017.

Brian and Desirae are grateful for the six months they had with Chance after his surgery. They know just about any doctor could have and would have opened doors that enabled them to extend their son’s life and give them a sliver of hope, regardless of the outcome.

“I still didn’t think of him any different than being a friend and helping us get through the lowest time of our life,” Brian said.

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Brian Harman missed almost the entire 2006-07 basketball season at Floyd County. He returned from Duke only for his team’s Senior Night against Eastern Montgomery.

It was the only game the Buffaloes won all season.

The Harmans were at Duke with Chance every other minute.

“The world stopped for us,” Desiree said. We spent every moment of every day with him for seven months. We were blessed. He was healthy enough.”

On July 4 near the end of Chance’s struggle at Duke, Brian took his son to an upper floor of the hospital to watch the holiday fireworks.

The viewing area was full of flags, each one representing a cancer survivor.

“I said, ‘Chance, do you see these flags?’” Brian said. “These people beat this thing. We’re going to win this.

“He looked up and said, ‘I’m tired and I’m ready to go to heaven.’ “

So the family prepared to take him back to Floyd for the final days.

“On July 5, we prayed,” Brian said. “He was wore out. We were wore out. We needed a sign. About that time, a guy comes in and says, ‘We’ve got an MRI scheduled.’ We said, ‘Chance, if you see that light, don’t worry about it. You just go on towards it.’

“He said, ‘But I ain’t got no shoes,’ “ Desirae said.

So Brian told his son, “ ‘Where you’re going, you ain’t going to need shoes.’ “

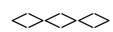
Chance died at Duke before the family could go home.

After Chance’s funeral at Topeka Church of the Brethren in Floyd County, the images of those survivor flags at Duke kept flashing through Brian Harman’s mind.

“Somebody had to go through [cancer] before us, to get us six months,” he said. “If we could give somebody that and they’d get a year? You give me another six months with Chance? Gosh. You give me six days. Right now you could give me six minutes.”

Then he had another thought.

Maybe it was time to help someone else.



Harman and Radford High boys basketball coach Rick Cormany have been bitter rivals within the Three Rivers District.

When Cormany saw Harman several months after Chance died, the Radford coach had a suggestion:

“ ‘We need to start [an event] in memory of your son,’ “ Cormany told Harman.

Thus, the Chance Harman Classic was born.

At the time, the Floyd community was dealing with the loss of two young boys to rare forms of brain cancer.

Three-year-old Joshua Cantrell, the grandson of legendary boys and girls basketball coach Alan Cantrell, and the son of eventual girls coach and athletic director Travis Cantrell, died in early 2007 from a rapidly advancing tumor.

“That whole thing was on everybody’s mind,” Cormany said. “[Chance] and my son, Cam, were the same age. It just really hit home and it does to this day.

“It’s a parent’s worst nightmare. Maybe it’s some kind of way of healing and keeping his memory alive and making sure it all goes to a good cause.”

The initial Classic, four games among eight local schools played on a single day, has mushroomed into an event that has featured as many as 14 games over a two-day period in early January.

The Classic awards scholarships to local high school seniors and donates what is left over to pediatric cancer research at Duke.

The event attracted some high-level teams with nationally known players now in the NBA such as Mitchell Wiggins, Harry Giles, Cole Anthony and Miles Bridges, a slew of volunteers and a loyal local following.

The 2022 Classic was held last week.

Rob Fulford was the basketball coach at Huntington Prep in West Virginia when was just getting off the ground. He brought his team to the 2012 tournament and pledged to come the following year.

Then Wiggins, the No. 1 pick in the 2014 NBA draft, showed up in Huntington in 2013.

Suddenly, ESPN wanted Huntington Prep to play in televised game on the same date as the Floyd classic.

“I told them we already had a prior commitment and weren’t going to back out of that,” said Fulford, who is now an assistant coach at Akron. “For us, we all have kids. Those stories hit home to all of us. We’ve all been affected by cancer in some form or fashion.”

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Brian and Desirae Harman have three other children, Destiny, a junior who plays for Floyd County’s girls basketball team; Chaycen, a seventh-grader; and Keenan, a fourth-grader.

Chaycen was born two years after Chance died. Chaycen’s first name contains all five letters of his older brother’s name, plus the letter ‘Y’ from ‘Destiny,’ who was 2 years old when Chance got sick.

“We were lucky enough to have more kids,” Brian said.

Chance and Destiny were very close as siblings.

Before Chance had his first surgery, he told his parents he wanted to trace the outline of his hands on his bedroom wall, along with those of his sister with a cross drawn in the middle.

Chance and Destiny.

It makes Brian Harman wonder about fate.

Why did his son get sick? Was it genetics? Was it environmental? Was it something else?

“Chance fell off a swing one time and hit his head. You’re like, ‘Maybe that’s what started it,’ “ Brian said. But you can always say ‘maybe’ but it’s the way it’s supposed to be. But the lives that have changed from that, it’s the reason for it.”

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Brian Harman had one thought when he first learned that Dr. Ralph Northam was running for governor:

“Why would he want to do that?”

The Harmans had a chance to ask the same question in person when Democrat made an early campaign stop at The Floyd Country Store.

“He was with some people, but he saw us and said, ‘Hold on a minute,’ “ Brian said. “We got an opportunity to talk. He was the same way then. It wasn’t like he was running for governor. He wasn’t any bigger than anybody else.”

When Northam took the governor’s chair, to the Harmans he was the same person they first saw playing on the floor with Chance in his office in Norfolk.

“I can see the professionalism but I can see he cares,” Brian said. “It ain’t like he changed when he got that role. He was like that, Day 1 when we had him.

“I’m not saying I agree with everything he decided, but person-wise, if I had another situation like this, I would trust anything he said. And I really don’t think it’s because we had a close friend. I’ll go to my grave thinking that.”

Northam will return to his medical practice next week. Opinions on his performance in office are varied, but the Harmans look through their own lens.

“He’s been put in a position that probably no other governor has been put into,” Brian Harman said. “It’s the same with Chance. You might say, ‘I would have done this. I would have done that.’ But until you get in that position, you don’t know what you’re going to do.”

When it came time to cast a ballot in 2017, Harman, a Republican, knew exactly what he would do.

“I voted for him,” he said.

THE ROANOKE TIMES

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## Wrestler adopts winning mindset

By Robert Anderson

Hidden Valley High School senior J.B. Dragovich will walk into Salem Civic Center on Friday intent on one thing: winning a VHSL Class 3 state wrestling championship.

Dragovich holds a perfect 31-0 record in 2022 and owns five titles at invitational tournaments in the 120-pound weight class, but a VHSL gold medal has proven elusive.

Dragovich placed third in 2019 at 106 pounds, was the state runner-up in 2020 at 113 pounds, and lost a year ago in the semifinals at 120 and took third place.

He has produced a 93-19 record at the suburban Roanoke County high school.

However, 13 years ago he was living in his native Ethiopia in danger of becoming a statistic.

Located on the Horn of Africa, the country has been estimated to have as many as 4.5 million orphaned children and up to 10,000 children living on the streets in Addis Ababa, the capital.

J.B. had a home and a mother, but she became ill and gave the 4-year-old up for adoption.

That's when Tony and Shari Dragovich entered the picture.

And J.B. met his match.

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Shari Monke grew up in Mount Olive, Illinois, as a daughter of a third-generation farmer.

Tony Dragovich was a year older in the same town, the son of a coal miner.

The high school sweethearts headed north to college, Tony to play football at the University of Chicago and Shari to pursue a teaching career through Loyola University.

They married in 1997 and soon started a family, which grew quickly to three sons, Wyatt, Isaac and Sam.

But the farmer's daughter wanted to grow the family, and she remembered something that caught her fancy as a child.

"A couple in our former church adopted in South Korea," she said. "I was a little kid and that really captured my attention ... 'Wow, you can do that.' It's something that kind of stuck with me."

Tony was completing his residency as a pain management physician in North Carolina when the couple seriously began think about adopting another child.

"We initially looked into China, but we found out we wouldn't qualify because they added a bunch of rules, so we started looking at other places," Shari said. "Someone said 'Have you ever thought about Ethiopia?' "

Tony and Shari liked the idea, and that went double.

They decided to adopt two children, a 5-year-old boy named Biruk and a 4-year-old girl, Selame.

"We started off thinking we would adopt one kiddo," Shari said. "We were willing to take kids aged 0 to 5, which is a little bit different. Most people want babies or infants, but we already did that three times."

"About halfway through the process I kept thinking that we could bring home two kids, we could save two kids. My husband said, 'OK, but if you want to bring home two kids we're doing this one time.' "

Other than the fact Tony was stationed at Fort Bragg and serving a six-month deployment in Baghdad with the Army, the adoption process went relatively smoothly.

"Four months into his deployment got phone call saying, 'Hey, there's a match with two kids in Ethiopia,'" Shari said. "Here's their pictures. Here's the date to go get them and go to court."

"There was a little bit of a point where I thought, 'Gosh, I could be going to Ethiopia to pick up kids by myself.'"

The trip fit Tony's schedule and the couple flew to Addis Ababa by way of Paris.

After spending time with the two children in a transition home, it was time to give their two adopted children new names.

Shari and Tony reached into the Bible and held on to their kids' past and welcomed Joshua Biruk (J.B.) and Rebekah Selame (Risa) Dragovich.

The new family left Africa and headed home with two new children and slightly mixed emotions.

"For me it was like, 'Oh my God, I'm taking home somebody else's kids. What am I doing?'" Shari said.

"Clearly, adoption is a gift and it's beautiful. But at the same time, adoption doesn't happen because everything has been great in somebody else's life. Adoption happens out of loss."

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J.B. Dragovich has few memories of his transition to American life other than conspicuous consumption.

"I remember seeing a plane and seeing cars," he said. "I had never seen that kind of stuff. Coming to America, everybody had a soccer ball, just tons of toys everywhere."

"I just remember walking into the house and seeing all these things, big rooms, having a dog. I never imagined being able to have a dog."

J.B. spoke Amharic when he arrived in the U.S. It took at least sixth months for J.B. and Risa to become conversational in English with their new family.

"There's a lot of research that says for every year that your child has not been with you in your care and stability, it's going to take at least that many years for them to fully bond and for your family to feel like a whole family," Shari said.

"It's a really long on-ramp."

Sports, in the form of family soccer games, became the bonding element.

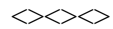
Tony brought the competitive nature from his four-year college football career to the family games. The kids bought in with blood, sweat and tears.

"It was two years before nobody either got thrown out of the game for having a bad attitude or nobody cried or nobody got in a fight," Tony said.

Nevertheless, the family drew close.

"It's good we had that sports early on that really spoke their language and we didn't have a common language any other way," Shari said. We could all speak that language of sports.

"I said, 'We can do this! Team Dragovich! With a family of seven!' "



Shari homeschooled all her children until the family moved to Roanoke in 2013.

By then, Wyatt was ready to begin a football career at Hidden Valley with Sam to follow.

Middle son Isaac attended Faith Christian and had a wrestling background.

J.B. took notice.

Isaac was prone to tossing neighborhood kids around the family rec room.

"J.B. would see that and say, 'I want to do that,' " Tony said.

"He was just a natural. As a rookie, never wrestling in his life, he won a couple tournaments."

J.B. tried baseball as a young child and played varsity football at Hidden Valley, starting on the 2021 team at defensive back.

He skipped his junior year of football to devote even more time to wrestling, but returned last fall to team up with Sam, the starting quarterback for the Titans.

"I think he got a little overwhelmed with wrestling," Sam said. "I think [football] helped him with that this year, where he could take his mind off it a little bit.

"He was ready to do something else and then get back to it, because wrestling is his life."

Sam, 6-foot-4, and J.B., 5-foot-6, are distinct personalities. They have different circles of friends. They're not built the same. They don't look alike.



But don't tell either one they're not brothers.

"Some people were like, 'You're step-brothers?' No, we're actual brothers," Sam said.

"I felt like it was just instantly. 'This is my brother. I love him.' It's been that way ever since."

J.B. left a much older natural brother behind in Ethiopia. He does not know the identity his biological father.

He remains in contact with his mother by telephone and says her health is improving.

"Being young, knowing my mom was there and leaving, it was super sad for me," he said. "But my perception now is a lot different than it was then. It makes a lot of sense why.

"I don't really have any desire to return there, but I want to see my mom again. It's hard to focus on that now. I feel like that will take care of itself."

J.B. feels the same way about this weekend's tournament, where he has not yet reached the top of the podium.

He hopes for a college wrestling career and badly wants a state championship, but the 120-pounder is bigger than that now.

"It would feel good to end off on a high note, but there's more to wrestling than winning titles for me," he said. "I'll go chase the next goal and get the most out of the moment.

Just say he has adopted a new focus.

"A lot of things could be a lot different," he said. "I could maybe not be in America right now, maybe not be wrestling. I might now be alive right now. I'm super fortunate."

THE ROANOKE TIMES

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Rural Retreat mourns loss of former coach

By Robert Anderson

They turned on the lights Saturday night at vacant Community Stadium in Rural Retreat. A prayer vigil, if you will, for former Rural Retreat football coach Dean Rhea.

It was appropriate because Rhea made the Rural Retreat program shine during an 18-year coaching tenure from 1986-2003.

The lights are out and the Rural Retreat community and school are in mourning.

Rhea, 66, died Saturday night in a hospital in Johnson City, Tennessee, after developing pneumonia following a recent bout with COVID-19.

Longtime coaching colleague and friend Quinton Hensley said Rhea had been hospitalized for two weeks and took a turn for the worse late last week.

“He had a kidney transplant and had had some cancer, but he was really doing pretty good,” Hensley said. “He’s like a big brother to me,” Hensley said. “My friend ... I tried to emulate him in a lot of ways.”

Rhea took over a Rural Retreat football program in 1986 that had produced a losing overall record for each of the eight head coaches who preceded the Smyth County native.

The Indians were 2-18 in the two immediate seasons before Rhea was hired. In his first season, Rural Retreat finished 8-3 and reached the VHSL playoffs for the first time in school history.

Despite being one of the smallest schools in the Hogohegee District, Rural Retreat fashioned a 135-66 record under Rhea with 11 postseason trips during an era when region playoffs included just four teams.

The Indians won Region C Division 1 titles in 1988, ‘93, ‘96 and ‘99 including a 15-7 overtime loss to eventual state champion Jonesville in the 1988 Division 1 semifinals.

Hensley replaced Rhea in 2004, but he admitted there was really no replacing Rhea as a figure in the Southwest Virginia landscape.

“My dad asked me back in the nineties, ‘What’s Coach Rhea’s secret?’ “ said Hensley, who is now an assistant coach at Wythe County rival George Wythe. “I don’t know if I had the right answer then, but I know what it is now.

“He knew how to treat people. He was a great motivator. He made those kids believe they could do anything. He knew what buttons to push. He knew if you needed a butt-chewing he’d give you one of those, and he knew when to pat you on the back.”

Former Northwood High basketball coach Stan Dunham saw that quality first-hand from Rhea when both men were young coaches at long-gone Rich Valley High in Smyth County.

Dunham coached varsity basketball. Rhea was the Steers’ 24-year-old head football and baseball coach.

“You heard the term player’s coach? That’s Dean Rhea,” Dunham said. “He knew if kids were fighting with their girlfriends. He knew who killed a deer. He knew who had a new truck. And a knew who had a can of Skoal in their pocket and he’d say, ‘Give me a dip, I’m out.’

“Those kids gravitated to him. He was on their level but a bit above.”

Rhea’s lifelong friend and high school teammate was Tom Buchanan, who later earned fame as “Big Tom” on the CBS reality television show “Survivor.”

Rhea and Buchanan were cut from the same cloth, and not just the bib overalls they favored.

“It’s hard to believe,” Buchanan said Sunday. “I was raised with him here every day, closer than a brother.

“We were walking buddies. We’d walk to football practice. We’d walk back home. Sometimes we’d jump in the river instead of taking showers.”

Rhea briefly attended Emory & Henry College before transferring to Bluefield State where he played football.

Buchanan was a scholarship football player at East Tennessee State, but he said he rarely got the best of Rhea, particularly when Gary "Peaches" Arnold showed up as Rich Valley's new football coach in 1973.

"I had a pretty good reputation and Peaches didn't know any of us and wanted us to work out at the school," Buchanan said. "They gave us a tire and put me on one end and Dean on the other. Well, Dean Rhea pulled me all over the gym.

"Dean beat me in every aspect in every sport."

Buchanan said he visited Rhea in the hospital earlier Saturday.

He said he spoke briefly to his old friend before Rhea briefly faded.

"Next thing I know he'd laid there for 30 minutes," Buchanan said. "He looked back up and said, 'Hey, how's Bo?' A man on his deathbed asking about my son. It's tough. Ever since he's been sick I've been wearing a Rural Retreat hat."

Rhea remained visible at Rural Retreat after resigning as the school's football coach.

He served as the Indians' athletic director and even had a one-year stint as Rural Retreat's interim wrestling coach.

He had been living in Tennessee in recent years to be closer to his wife's work, but he continued to serve as a Rural Retreat football assistant despite what was more than a one hour commute each way.

Last fall, Rhea coached Rural Retreat's middle school football team to an undefeated season.

Current Rural Retreat football coach and AD Jamey Hughes said Rhea's loss cannot be underestimated.

"To say that we have lost a significant part of our football program, our school, and our community would be a huge understatement," he said.

"Coach Rhea was so much more than a football coach. He was a mentor, a father figure, and a friend. His love for this program and the orange and black was special.

On Oct. 23, Rural Retreat named the playing surface at Community Stadium "Dean Rhea Field" in a ceremony that Buchanan attended.

Rhea wanted the two old walking buddies to go side by side one last time for the dedication at midfield.

"Dean said, 'Come on, walk out there with me,' " Buchanan said. "I said, 'No, Dean, this is your day in the sun.' "