

Jay Tolson

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Good morning.

I'm Jay Tolson, Owen's honorary uncle and a friend of his father since shortly after we fell out of the cradle. As a result, I came to think of the Strong's, and later the Durst-Strong's, as my second family.

And what a joy and privilege that connection has been over the years, including the special joy of coming to know Ed and Laurel's two remarkable children, Owen and Leda.

And now, what an unspeakable sadness.....

Trying to compose these few words about Owen, I keep running into the wall of the past tense—its utter inadequacy, its untruth. Owen is not of the past. Owen is still vitally present, more present even in his absence than most people in their presence are. How is this possible? How is it that the brightness of his being still shines so strongly among us?

I have no final answers, only memories containing hints.

One has become almost legendary in the Durst-Strong family chronicle.

Owen is a boy of about 5 or 6 at swimming pool party at his grandmother's apartment in Arlington, Virginia. His arm is in a cast, but he is not to be deterred and holds it awkwardly over his head, like this, as he enters the pool and wades toward us.

"Does anybody think this is fun?" he calls out, but those plaintive words are belied by the smile that is spreading across his face. Everybody in and around the pool cracks up. Owen lights things up—he always does—and a great time is had by all.

Owen had such grace, so many wonderful qualities, but especially generosity, humility, kindness, and gratitude. Owen knew he had so much to be thankful for: wonderful, nurturing parents; a funny and brilliant sister, delightful cousins, an expanding circle of devoted friends. He had so many gifts, ranging from the athletic to, as you've heard, the musical.

Nor should we forget that enormous sense of humor. He could be side-splittingly funny and as wry as his mother. He could mimic—but in the best way, with loving care--almost any accent, including the lyrical Bajan and the impossibly elided consonants of Czech. (I think his long friendship with Sasha might have helped him with those Slavic sounds).

So many gifts—and perhaps none greater than what he found with the love of his life, the amazing Stacia, who was willing and able to share so much with him during their last year together, the challenges and difficulties as well as the joys.

Many who are given so much in life give back little in return, but Owen gave back as much as he received, and would have given back so much more if had been given the time.

One truth about Owen, I believe, is that he really couldn't be told what to do. He could be led to many things, up to a point, but he would only go so far down the ways that others wished for him. When he briefly worked for me as intern in the Prague newsroom of Radio Free Europe, I was so impressed by the interviews he produced that I urged him to consider journalism. I'm sure other bosses, teachers, coaches and mentors made similar suggestions about other pursuits. Owen could have gone down so many roads and done brilliantly.

But my sense of Owen is that, even as he found great pleasure in his various jobs, none more than the last working with his uncles, he was always searching for his special thing, the thing that would let him express what was in his heart. And here is the triumph of his far-too-short life: Owen found that thing in the music he wrote and gave beautiful, haunting voice to. With his band of Evening Fools, Owen found it, made the most of it, and touched our hearts with it.

Owen was wise beyond his years about the fate that had been dealt him. When my wife Jane had a conversation with him last May during a walk in the beautiful Duke Forest, he told her, "I decided early on that I wasn't going to get stuck on 'Why did this happen? Why me?' It was just really bad luck."

Owen made it clear he wasn't about to give up, that he planned to live, but he told her he accepted it if he didn't, that he was okay with it." It was that acceptance that bowled her over. She had always enjoyed Owen's company, she later wrote, "But after that conversation in the spring, beneath the trees, watching him look at the birds and bugs with Laurel, I was truly awed by him."

In my last phone conversation with Owen, after it was clear that the immunotherapy was no longer working, Owen astonished me with his optimism. I was tiptoeing around various topics, hesitant to bring up anything that might conjure thoughts of a future that was likely to be cut short, but Owen was having none of that. He charged right through my reticence. His voice strong and confident, he talked about Stacia, his band, and a song that he was working on.

I didn't get to hear that song. Maybe I will yet. Maybe we are all just beginning to hear it.