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Susana Bickel
Senior
Cardinal Ritter High School
Teacher: Mrs. Liz Ramos
Hoosier Hero: K. David McKee
Page One

Weak Joints, Strong Heart

My Hoosier Hero nominee is Mr. K. David McKee. David has very quietly and humbly inspired my life and so many others. He has taken what has resulted in an incredibly debilitating disease, and made the search for a cure a cornerstone of his life. However, his efforts are not directed at himself -- they are always for the benefit of the children who also suffer from this disease. For that reason, I think David is an outstanding and deserving Hoosier Hero.

David was born in 1964 and is a life long time resident of Indiana. The first three years of his life were as common as one might expect. He was an energetic toddler playing with his siblings, innocent of the world around him. At the age of four his parents noticed a profound change in his development. He walked with pain, his wrists were swollen, and he fatigued easily. Repeated trips to the pediatrician revealed nothing wrong. His parents were told it is just “growing pains”. Finally, after multiple misdiagnoses, it was determined that David was suffering from systemic juvenile rheumatoid arthritis. On the one hand there was a sense of relief that David’s parents and the doctors knew what he had. However, treating a disease most thought only to affect older adults was something new to his local medical professionals. A daily routine of wearing splints at night to support his hands and wrists, dipping his hands in 120 degree paraffin baths each morning before school, and taking 16 - 20 aspirin a day was the only treatment for a crippling, auto-immune disease.

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Page Two

Sadly, the lack of knowledge and even resistance from some medical professionals who seemed to think this was just “growing pains of a little boy” proved to be tragic. Forty-four years later, David has undergone fourteen surgeries, has had multiple joint replacements due to the deterioration caused by rheumatic arthritis, takes numerous medications on a daily basis, and is frequently in excruciating pain.

This brief medical history of David’s life might be enough to warrant him hero status. Yet it is what he has done in his adulthood while battling this disease that makes him extraordinary. Despite repeating fourth grade when the medications he was taking caused him enormous discomfort and the inability to focus, David went on to excel in school. He graduated from Vincennes University with two degrees in electronics and robotics. He then went on to Indiana State University and received a degree in computer integrated manufacturing all while balancing medical surgeries and the discomfort of taking multiple medications. Finding a good job was a goal David accomplished. He is employed at Eli Lilly as a senior process automation engineer. However, he sees his life as a voice for those who suffer what he has, not himself. David has devoted his efforts to making sure that each of the 6400 Hoosier children diagnosed with rheumatoid arthritis do not face the same battles he faced. David has done this by tirelessly committing himself to volunteer service over the past six years at the Arthritis Foundation, Indiana Chapter. He has given endless hours of his time using his technical expertise in computer integrated manufacturing to assist with special events for the Arthritis Foundation, including their annual walk, advocacy issues, mission delivery, and speaking when asked about his

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Page Three

struggle living with a disease that has significantly crippled his body.

My reason for David's nomination is not just as a passive admirer of his volunteer service knowing the incredible challenges and physical suffering he has faced. My admiration for David also comes from my own personal struggle with the same disease which I have been battling for the past seven years when I was diagnosed at the age of nine. I too have undergone misdiagnosis of the disease, was put on a regiment of experimental treatments, and at one point was so sick that I was wheelchair bound and physically unable to go to my entire freshman year of high school. I have been fortunate to witness David advocating on behalf of the children who suffer from this devastating disease. In fact, everything David does to draw attention to the disease is done for the benefit of the children suffering from this illness. Given all that David has gone through it would be understandable if he turned inward and only focused on his own physical suffering. Yet when asked to "tell his story" you get five minutes of David and twenty-five minutes of how much more needs to be done to treat and support the children who have this disease.

David McKee is my Hoosier Hero for both the reasons stated and for what is yet to come from his efforts. His tireless example of living your life for others, despite its limitations is extraordinary. David has been acknowledged for his service in a number of ways, including most recently receiving the 2008 Jefferson Award for Volunteerism by his employer. However, he always deflects attention away from himself and explains why he does this tireless work: "My inspiration comes from helping children with arthritis. I know they need a voice now more than

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Page Four

ever and I am doing everything I can to provide them a better and brighter future.” Myself and the other 6400 Indiana children with this disease find David truly heroic.