



TRIUMPH AFTER TRAGEDY

When Jack Jordan was nine years old, his dad passed away in a tragic drowning accident in Lake Michigan. His mom, despite her own health issues, did her best to raise four children on her own. To help his family, Jack began caddying — and recently was awarded a life-changing gift: the Evans Scholarship.

BY AMY FULLER

For the Jordan clan of St. Charles, Illinois, family vacations to South Haven, Michigan, were a highlight of the summer.

In August 2009, the annual trip included Marty and Maureen Jordan, and their three kids, Jack, Liam and

Caroline. Joining them were Marty's sister and brother, and their kids — 10 cousins in all.

And another was on the way. Marty and Maureen, seven weeks pregnant at the time, were planning on sharing the exciting news with their relatives

during the trip.

On Aug. 1, Marty, 45, headed out into the waves, along with five children — his eldest son, Jack, 9, and three nieces and a nephew. It had drizzled earlier in the day, but the skies had cleared.

No one knew that a rip current had already led to the rescue of two swimmers that morning, according to newspaper accounts. Soon, the gusting winds had spawned gigantic waves, and the swelling water sucked the group into the lake.

The wind drowned out their cries for help. But on the pier, panicked bystanders took notice of what was happening and began screaming and throwing life preservers into the water. The rest of the Jordan family on land ran to help and called 911.

Fighting to keep afloat, Marty helped his son Jack and a niece latch onto a life ring, pushing them to safety, according to newspaper reports. The other kids had also been rescued.

But a relative who jumped into the water to help Marty was unable to save him. By the time paramedics arrived and pulled him from the water, it was too late.

Although some memories are hazy, Jack remembers being hoisted from the water and frantically searching for the rest of his family.

"All my cousins luckily escaped, but it wasn't until many minutes later that I saw my dad's lifeless body being dragged in from the surf by firemen," he recalls.

The children were safe, but their hero — a father and uncle — was gone.

And Marty was a hero, in all senses of the word. One of 10 children, he had spent 25 years as a social worker, helping abused and neglected children. He was a volunteer youth coach and a passionate fundraiser, as well as a great dad and loving husband, Maureen Jordan recalls.

He was always one to help change diapers and play games with the kids, as well as tackle household chores, like taking out the garbage.

"Although he died honorably, he's still gone," Maureen told the *Chicago Tribune* almost a year after her husband's death. "The kids on some level have some understanding that he died for a reason. And it's not from me saying it, because I'm still struggling with that. But I do believe that, without a doubt, he couldn't have lived with himself if any of the children had died."

A new reality

For the Jordan family, it was time to face a new reality.

"It wasn't until the next day when the full magnitude of the situation hit me," Jack recalls. "I was now, at nine years old, the oldest of three kids with a widowed mother who was expecting a baby. Every expectation I had about the future was gone, in an instant."

No other day has impacted the course of his life more, Jack says. "It plays a huge part in my background and in the person I am today," he says.

Maureen, who once had worked in hospice, had her youngest, Marty, Jr., on St. Patrick's Day of 2010. For the sake of her kids, she tried to hold it

together on a daily basis, though she struggled to cope on the inside.

Still, it was important to talk about Marty and ensure they remembered their father, she said. "He was their life," she told the *Tribune* in 2010. "So to have this huge part of their life gone, you can't just act like it didn't happen because that's more damaging. They are young, and I think it's important that they remember their father and that the memories they have of him stay very fresh ... and that's why I go on."

And with the help of both her and Marty's large extended families, as well as community fundraisers, life went on.

continued





The tragedy made Jack, who had always been a responsible, motivated child, even more focused. He knew that when it came to securing his future, he'd have no one to rely on but himself.

"After my dad died, I knew I would have to find a way to pay for college on my own," Jack said. "So, since then, I have worked exceedingly hard in school. This wasn't tough for me, as I've always loved learning and challenging myself, but it certainly helped to have the extra motivation of helping my family."

After one community fundraiser, the suggestion was passed along to Maureen that caddying could provide Jack the opportunity to attend college one day. She never forgot it. Marty had been a caddie when he was young, and he and his brothers loved to golf. So when Jack was in eighth grade, he headed out to Elgin Country Club — with his sights, even then, set on earning the Evans Scholarship.

"Jack knew that caddying was a way for him to go to college," Maureen says. "He understood this was about his future. And whatever he sets his mind to, he always

wants to do the best job possible."

But it wasn't easy. Jack played baseball and with a demanding schedule, it caused conflicts at times with coaches when he had to miss games, practices and tournaments.

Caddying always came first. "Playing college baseball was always a dream of mine, but in the long run, it just made more sense to focus on caddying in order to help my family," Jack said.

And the job was a natural fit for him. Never one content to lounge in front of a TV, he enjoyed the flexible schedule and money caddying offered.

"I realized immediately it was the best job I could have," he says. "I loved being outside, and I've always been a social person. I loved talking with the members."

By the time he was a junior at St. Charles East High School, Jack not only was a top caddie at his club, but an outstanding student, taking and excelling in all the most difficult classes.

Now a senior, he is a leader in the school's mentoring program, captain of the baseball team and helps head the student section, called Orange Fever, at sporting events.

"Jack's compassion, character and integrity stands out in many ways, and he is one of the most academically talented, mature and respectful students I've had in 24 years," school counselor Jeff Bialeschki said in a recommendation letter.

"He is one of my students who, if possible, I would take home and place him on my fireplace mantel as an example to my

"The challenges I've faced have helped make me tougher, more resilient and harder-working than I would have been had it not been for those difficulties. It's reassuring to have confidence in my ability to deal with anything thrown my way."

-Jack Jordan

two sons of how I want them to grow up and all the traits to which I want them to aspire," he writes.

Building resilience

While Jack was busy excelling on and off the course, life threw another curveball in December 2016, when Maureen was diagnosed with breast cancer. She began treatment right away.

"Those winter months were some of the toughest days I've gone through," Jack recalls. "I couldn't focus in school, I didn't have any energy, and I was just constantly stressed."

Thankfully, Maureen was declared cancer-free as of this past August.

Jack credits his strength to the adversity he has faced, as well as to having strong family support.

"The challenges I've faced have helped make me tougher, more resilient, and harder-working than I would have been had it not been for those difficulties," he says. "Not many tasks I might have to complete in the future will equal in magnitude to what I've already tackled, and it's reassuring to have confidence in my ability to deal with anything thrown my way."

This past fall, Jack applied for the Evans Scholarship, and in November, he had his selection meeting. Though he was optimistic about his chances, learning that he had earned the Evans Scholarship was still one of the most rewarding moments of his life.

"I just felt this huge sense of relief," he says. "There's nothing comparable to the feeling of working hard toward a goal and finally accomplishing it."

It was a life-changing gift for his whole family. "I am very proud of and happy for him," says Maureen, who expects her other children to begin caddying, as well. "It's not possible for me to pay for college for him. So for him to have this opportunity, it's such a huge relief and a blessing to not be burdened by that debt."

Jack plans to study engineering at



Northwestern University.

In the meantime, his high school accolades continue to pile up. He recently was selected for the *Kane County Chronicle's* Achievement Program, as well as the *Daily Herald's* Leadership Team, which recognizes high school students who excel in volunteerism and community service.

"No matter where I go, I still want to be the best role model I can for my younger siblings," Jack says. "The experiences I've

had have helped build a strong work ethic, determination, resilience and ambition."

There is no doubt Marty would be proud of his son, Maureen says.

"They were really close," she says. "Even though they were only together for nine years, Jack learned how to be a great person from his dad, seeing how he treated people and how much he loved us. I have no doubt that those lessons stayed with him."

