

Teen Shows Us the Art of Caring

Gabe Donovan is a 15 year old boy who attends eighth grade at Christian Brothers Academy in New York. Although he enjoys the things an average 15 year old boy would—video games, watching sports, and hanging out with his friends—he has faced some incredible challenges in his life. As an infant, Gabe was diagnosed with a rare disease named neurofibromatosis.

Gabe's illness is a brain disorder that causes tumors along the nerves in the skin, brain, other parts of the body, and also weakens his bones. Gabe has gone through many rounds of chemotherapy, broken bones, and doctors appointments. Gabe's mother, Mrs. O'Brien remembered asking the doctor when Gabe was first diagnosed, "Is he going to have a normal life?" The doctor responded to her, "Why don't we have the goal of an extraordinary life?" And so far, Gabe has done just that exceeding the expectations anyone would have for him.

Gabe visits a summer camp yearly for children with life-threatening diseases called the Double H Ranch. Gabe has loved his experience at Double H so much, he used his one wish from the Make-a-Wish Foundation to restore the barn area of the camp in honor of his camp friend, Michael, who passed away from the same illness he has. Gabe's selflessness and thoughtfulness does not end there.

Although Gabe regularly sees a team of doctors and travels twice a year to visit a specialty doctor in Washington, D.C., Gabe has recently been healthy. Instead of avoiding the doctors offices like one would expect him to, Gabe has poured all of his extra time and energy into raising money for another medical center: St. Margaret's, a center as they say on their web site for "kids who are facing the most serious medical challenges and deserve the opportunity to just be kids."

It all started when his mother told him about a 14 year old girl that she had met as part of her work there, Lilly, who had also attended Double H Ranch, after being in a life-altering car

accident when she was five years old. Without the help of specialized machines, Lilly is unable to move or breathe on her own, and she was unable to start high school without yet another assistive technology: augmentative and alternative communication device (AAC) that would track her eye movements and allow Lilly to read, write, communicate, and even search the internet... all without moving her hands! Finishing school was especially important to Lilly because her mother, who had passed away, always wanted to see her graduate. However, the new technology that Lilly needed would cost \$16,000, and Lilly's family was unable to afford it.

Gabe didn't hesitate, saying, "I'm an individual with a disability as well. And I use technologies. My family is lucky enough to have a job where we can afford them. And I feel sad that kids like Lilly can't get what they need. [I had to] figure out a way to help her." Gabe visited with Lilly and came up with the idea of creating a design to go on bags and t-shirts that they could share on social media and "challenge" people to purchase. So he created a floral design, inspired by Lilly's name, and titled it "The Adirondack Lilly".

Once he created the design, Gabe then had to identify a company to manufacture the products. Gabe chose a company that would broaden the goodness coming from his and Lilly's project. He chose Spectrum Designs, a print and design company that hires people with developmental disabilities. Spectrum Designs is run with the mission of employing and training people who may not otherwise have an opportunity to work, just like Lilly. The chief executive of the company said, "In almost 9 years of existence, I don't recall a project that has sparked as much excitement, compassion, and general goodwill as this one has."

The head of Gabe's School, James Schlegel, calls both Gabe and Lilly an "inspiration" and says, "In every way, Gabe is a servant-leader. He has faced serious medical challenges in his life and as soon as he was well enough to help others, he did. Instead of focusing on any negative aspect of life, he recognized how fortunate he is and serves others. Gabe leads by example and uses his charismatic person to attract others to serve alongside him."

Gabe certainly is an inspiration and fortunately the Adirondack Lilly has been a hit. The social media campaign for Adirondack Lilly took a big leap forward when “American Idol” finalist Madison VanDenburg learned about the cause and encouraged her followers to purchase Adirondack Lilly products. Gabe has now tripled his original fundraising goal, raising almost \$50,000 for St. Margarets. This money will not only buy Lilly’s technology to enable her to get her high school degree, but also other similar technologies that will empower other children at St. Margarets.¹

¹Sources:

<https://evangelist.org/Content/Features/Catholic-schools/Article/Gabe-s-life-a-lot-more-than-neurofibromatosis/16/67/26642>

<https://www.yahoo.com/lifestyle/teen-with-disabilities-raises-funds-to-help-disabled-girl-attend-high-school-231302504.html>

<https://evangelist.org/Content/Default/Homepage-Rotator/Article/THE-ADIRONDACK-LILY-TAKES-OVER/-3/141/27836?s=1>

<https://www.timesunion.com/news/article/Albany-teen-with-disabilities-raises-funds-to-14355402.php#photo-18101493>

<https://www.cfdsny.org/st-margarets-center>