

Headline: Elon's Williams, a brain cancer survivor, forms unique bond with Jake Ingram

By Michael J. Lewis

Most college students who become involved with Friends of Jaclyn are thrilled to get to know a child who has suffered from a brain tumor, and they do their best to empathize, inspire and befriend the new member of their community.

But it's impossible for them to truly know what their new pal has gone through, because they've been lucky enough to have been tumor-free in their life.

But there's one FOJ superstar college student who unfortunately knows exactly what the adoptees go through, and she's used that knowledge to form a special bond.

Eliza Williams graduated from Elon College in North Carolina last year, and the now-24 year old currently works at Brigham and Women's Hospital in Boston.

It's a familiar place for her, unfortunately; 20 years ago Eliza was diagnosed with a pilocytic astrocytoma, and she endured several surgeries as part of her treatment. Her second operation, when she was 7, resulted in severe paralysis on the left side of her face, leaving her with a partial lack of muscle movement that persists to this day.

Partly out of her experience as a child with a brain tumor, Eliza has always been motivated to help sick children and others in need, and when she heard about FOJ in 2014, she immediately knew she wanted to get involved.

"I literally stumbled upon FOJ through a Facebook post I saw, and then I contacted (FOJ Founder) Denis Murphy and told him my story, and he was really enthusiastic," Eliza said. "So I knew I had to get teams at Elon involved."

In the spring of 2014 the college's men's tennis team adopted Jake Ingram, a then-12-year-old Chapel Hill resident who had previously been with North Carolina State men's basketball. Right from the start, the fun-loving, personable Jake hit it off with Eliza, head coach Michael Leonard, and his team.

“These kids have so much going on in their lives, but they always found time for Jake,” said Rachel Ingham, Jake’s mom. “He wasn’t a big tennis fan at first, but he grew to really like the sport, thanks to how great the team was.”

Jake would attend practices, got his own locker in the locker room, and even rallied with the players after their own matches. The Elon women’s team also hung out with Jake as well.

“I’m sure they were tired,” Rachel said, “but they always hit with him.”

Elon player Brian Kowalski was one of Jake’s closest friends on the team; they shared a love of cooking and telling jokes. Stefan Fortmann has also grown tight with Jake.

Eliza was also heavily involved with Jake, saying he “is like the happiest kid you have ever seen. I mean, for all the things he’s had to deal with, that he has such joy and exuberance about life is so wonderful.”

Eliza and Jake bonded over their shared experience, having conversations about their illness and relating in a way that the tennis players and others couldn’t.

“I think to a certain extent he related to me right away, once I told him what I had gone through, and we talked about some of the feelings and emotions he’s had,” Eliza said.

“Oh it absolutely made a big difference having Eliza involved, she was wonderful with Jake,” Rachel Ingham said. “She called him all the time, and they talked about everything.”

As seems to happen often with FOJ teams once they adopt a child, success on the court followed. Elon’s men won the Southern Conference championship in 2014, their first league title in seven years. Rachel was stunned when Coach Anderson told her that he wanted Jake to have his championship ring.

She said she told him that wouldn’t be fair, he’d earned his ring as a coach. The team then ordered a special championship ring for Jake, now one of his prized possessions.

Jake’s health is also on the upswing; after being on hospice care last fall, he’s rallied and has had no setbacks lately.

For Eliza, connecting her school with a child who's undergone the same things she did has been incredibly rewarding.

"I'm so passionate about helping kids, and when you meet someone like Jake, you become even more passionate," she said. "Friends of Jaclyn does so much for these kids, I'm just so happy Elon is involved in such a positive way."