

Headline: An incredible bond between a catcher and young boy lives on in Dayton baseball program

By Michael J. Lewis

The two friends would drive around for hours, cruising the streets of suburban Ohio, going everywhere and nowhere, talking about nothing and everything.

They'd talk about their problems, though Kuris Duggan knows his didn't amount to a grain of sand compared to the enormous issues his best buddy, a 12-year-old named Cameron Neal, had already stared down.

They'd go to KFC for some fried chicken, or go-karting, or anywhere two buddies go when they just want to get away from everyone else: Away from hospitals and needles and medicine. Away from college classwork and stress and thinking about hopes for a fantastic senior baseball season being dashed.

Whatever they did, wherever they went, the music blaring from Duggan's car speakers was the same.

Tim McGraw's "Live Like You Were Dying."

*He said I was in my early 40's,
With a lot of life before me,
And a moment came that stopped me on a dime.
I spent most of the next days, lookin' at the x-rays,
Talkin' 'bout the options and talkin' 'bout sweet time.
Asked him when it sank in, that this might really be the real end.*

"That was the song that meant the most to him," Kuris Duggan says, thinking back. "He liked all kinds of music, but that song, listening to the words, really hit home with him. And with me, too."

Kuris Duggan has a tattoo on the inside of his right wrist. He got it shortly after Sept. 14, 2015, when his best friend Cameron passed away after a lengthy, agonizing battle with anaplastic ependymoma, a type of tumor that grows from cells inside the brain cavity.

For the previous two years, this 22-year-old ballplayer from Illinois and this 12-year-old ill child from Dayton became the closest of friends. Brothers, really. They shared joy and sorrow and, as the Kipling poem says, “treated both imposters just the same.”

It began with a spur of the moment, perhaps fated decision, from Duggan on the morning of March 22, 2013, when Friends of Jaclyn and the Dayton baseball team officially adopted Cameron. Along with his stepmom Shawnalee and dad Jason, they arrived at the team facility and took part in a beautiful ceremony.

Kuris was there, but he didn’t know why. Ever since injuring his hand and wrist before the season and knowing he’d have to sit out a year on the diamond, he was depressed. The Dayton starting catcher rarely left his bedroom, rarely went to class, and found it too painful emotionally to be around his buddies on the Flyers team.

“But that day (Cam was adopted), for some reason, I decided to go to practice,” Kuris said. “And I got there and found out we were adopting Cam, and learned about what he’d gone through, and we bonded.”

Kuris and Cameron signed each other’s casts on their arms, and got to talking. One conversation led to another the next day, and the day after that, and soon a bond formed.

“He was an old soul; he was a 12-year-old with a great sense of humor,” Kuris recalled. “I started having long talks with him and seeing what he had to go through, he had such a much harder road than I did. I tell everyone: When I met Cam, it was the darkest time I’d had in my life. So I’m forever indebted to him for pulling me out of my funk.

“It took a 12-year-old kid who looked at me like I was the coolest guy in the world to save me.”

*I went sky divin',
I went rocky mountain climbin',
I went 2.7 seconds on a bull name Fumanchu.
And I loved deeper,
And I spoke sweeter,
And I gave forgiveness I've been denying,*

*And he said someday I hope you get the chance,
To live like you were dyin'.*

Dayton coach Tony Vittorio said he always preaches to his players to give back, learn to lead, and lead to serve. When his team adopted Cameron, he saw a lot of leading going on.

Players took Cameron fishing, and out to eat, and when he had doctor's appointments, a whole bunch of them would show up.

"He always made you laugh, and he liked to laugh at anything you did," Vittorio says. "But honestly, the relationship we had with Cam and the family, it was all because of the way Kuris immediately stepped up. I'm so proud of that young man, and the way he cared for Cam."

Kuris said he sometimes talked to Cam about his illness, but not often.

"He would bring it up, and say he knew cancer was going to kill him," Kuris says. "He never said he was scared, we would just talk about how he had to keep fighting, and stay tough.

"And I'd tell him," Kuris adds, "that when you're tired of fighting, don't worry, we'll be right here to fight for you."

Before one surgery Cam had in the summer of 2014, Kuris and the family sat in the waiting room at Dayton Children's Hospital, and tried to lighten the mood by asking Kam what he wanted to eat when the surgery was over.

"KFC's mac and cheese," Kuris recalls with a laugh. "And when he woke up, that's the first thing he said to me: 'I want KFC!'"

Shawnalee and the Neal family embraced Kuris, and as 2014 stretched into 2015, Kuris was able to attend Flyers practices and hang with his buddy.

But in the spring Cam started to have some issues. Vittorio says he noticed some changes, that he wasn't the same kid with the vibrant personality and great sense of humor.

Soon, Cam wasn't able to come to practices and games. To help him still get out of the house a little bit, Kuris and some team members, along with Dayton's field maintenance workers, went to the Neal house and built a wheelchair ramp.

"You just try to keep his spirits up, and you prepare yourself mentally for the worst," Kuris says.

After a long battle, Cam earned his angel wings on Sept. 14, 2015. Kuris and Coach Vittorio spoke at the funeral.

"I was heartbroken, but I was almost a little relieved, because I know how much he was suffering," Kuris says. "And I knew that I would continue to pass along his message, for the rest of my life."

*And I watched an eagle as it was flyin'
And he said someday I hope you get the chance,
To live like you were dyin.'*

The Dayton team has dedicated their 2016 season to Cam. They've created a "Cam 10" award as well, that each year will go to the player who's most competitive, most fun to be around, and most coachable.

Not surprisingly, the first recipient of the award was Kuris Duggan, who carries a visible reminder of Cam on his right wrist, always.

"I'm more thankful for the relationship I've had with Cam and his family than anything else in my life, ever," Kuris says. "Every moment with him was precious, and I know none of us who knew him will ever forget him."

