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A Legacy Of Love Family Continues Tropical Tradition, Searches For Cure

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THE MORNING NEWS

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FAYETTEVILLE -- Every year, the Gibson family goes on a scuba diving trip. The experience is one that has become a tradition and a way to honor a loved one who is no longer with them.

Donald Ryan Gibson died in 2001 at the age of 25 from leukemia. It was Ryan who possessed a love of all things tropical and was the instigator in his family's diving adventures.

Don and Carol Lynn Gibson, his parents, work nearly year-round in preparation for a variety of events, including the annual One Particular Harbor event in July.

The Ryan Gibson Foundation hosts several events throughout the United States to raise awareness and money for leukemia research.

Scott "Hook" Harmeling is the president/founder and director of the foundation. He was Ryan's fraternity brother. Don Gibson is the director for the Arkansas chapter, and Derek Gibson, Ryan's brother, is the special events director of the Arkansas chapter.

Other chapters are in Houston and Austin, Texas, Kansas City, Mo., and Denver.

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The widespread network is a testament to how much people admired Ryan's zest for life during his illness and commitment to finding a cure for leukemia.

The day the Gibsons were interviewed at their Fayetteville home, they were preparing to leave for a scuba diving trip to Belize.

"Diving off the coral reefs in Grand Cayman and Cozumel are among my favorite memories with Ryan," said Carol Lynn.

"He got us involved. First his brother, then Derek's wife, Jennifer."

Jennifer Gibson said her first trip with the family opened up a whole new world.

"I can see why Ryan enjoyed the peace and beauty," she said.

Her son Dylan's name is linked to Ryan's, with the same initials of DRG and symbolism of the sea.

"His name means son of the sea. It was a very surreal moment when we found the name's meaning," Jennifer said.

Their home incorporates this love of diving in a large picture of four people enjoying the pristine blue waters under swaying palm trees.

The artist later added the four figures to represent Don, Carol Lynn, Derek and Ryan.

One Particular Harbor

Guests can experience a tropical beach scene at One Particular Harbor on Saturday at the Fayetteville Town Center. The event started out with 100 invitations, cards and letters to people who knew Ryan.

It has grown into one of the most anticipated events of the summer. Don Gibson said he wanted to express that the event is not exclusive to people involved with the foundation or who knew the family.

"We want everyone to be included," he said. The event is open to anyone, and tickets may be purchased at the door.

One of the best aspects of this event is that it has local ties and is in honor of a Northwest Arkansas resident, Carol Lynn said.

"Another thing people like about this event is they know where their money is going," she said.

The event takes the Gibsons about six months to plan and execute. They also hold a pre-party, Cheeseburgers in Paradise, which takes place at George's Majestic Lounge in Fayetteville.

"We are blessed with Suzie Stephens and Jim Hatfield. They put that event on for us."

Patrons can expect the town center to be transformed into a oceanside extravaganza, complete with island fare, silent and live auction items and music by Oreo Blue.

Sports memorabilia and dinner packages are also planned. Carol Lynn said they had planned to have a guitar signed by Tom Petty as part of the live auction.

Three "live" auction items include:

-- Extreme Makeover - couples edition

* Full makeover and salon and spa day at Pink Papaya

* Clothing for two at Blue Coconut

* Evening stay at The Inn at Carnall Hall on the University of Arkansas campus

* Dining at Ella's Restaurant at The Inn at Carnall Hall

* Before and after pictures

-- A one-week stay in Tahoe for four people at the Condo of Avis and Bill Bailey, airfare included

-- Pick a "Decade Party" for 10 hosted by the Meier, Bova, O'Neal, Cunningham families. Whether you're a '50s rocker or a '70s disco queen, we can accommodate. Show up dressed in appropriate clothing, listen to a DJ spin tunes from that time, eat food reminiscent of the era, plus other surprises.

Mary Stockland of Springdale, a friend to the Gibsons, said the event was for a great cause and is fun with casual dress and a Caribbean flare.

"It's a fun, casual party that people enjoy. We have lot of age groups, younger and older, at the fundraiser."

She and her husband, Dick Stockland, had attended church with the Gibsons.

"Ryan was a fine young man," Mary said.

"I think they have done a wonderful job of raising awareness and a great deal of money toward leukemia research. I so admire them for taking this tragedy and making something positive out of it by raising money for other families to have a better future."

Mary Frances Daut of Springdale described the event as a celebration of life and good times.

She is Ryan's cousin and has been involved with the foundation from its inception.

"The foundation is wonderful for the community and honors Ryan's memory. He was the most positive, kind and most selfless person I've ever known."

While guests are encouraged to have a good time, an educational component is added to the fundraiser. Dr. Peter Emmanuel joined the Arkansas Cancer Research Center in Little Rock on July 1 and plans to join Dr. James Suen for the event.

"Dr. Emmanuel is very special to us, because not only is he executive director, his specialty is leukemia, primarily in pediatric leukemia," Don said.

"We are excited he is bringing his research to Arkansas. We are always looking for ways to help research efforts in Arkansas through our foundation," he said.

Suen said the Arkansas Cancer Research Center received a grant from the Ryan Gibson Foundation over a year ago. The money was used to support some research on a large group of children with leukemia from multiple cancer centers, he added.

"Because of the large amount of data, the research is still ongoing and should yield some important information on children's leukemias, especially the children with Down's syndrome who had leukemias and did much better.

"The ACRC is beginning to focus on leukemia and the new executive director which we recruited to take my job on July 1, is internationally known for leukemia treatment and research."

The center has also received a \$3 million grant for two endowed chairs for leukemia treatment and research.

"We plan to continue our collaboration with the Ryan Gibson Foundation to find a cure for leukemia," Suen said.

The foundation announces grants as they are received. The most recent was to Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center for its research in New York.

A long-term goal is to create an endowment that, over time, will fund leukemia research.

Building A Legacy

The "swishes" seen on the exterior of Legacy National Bank in Springdale represent the continuum of time, Don said. He is president and chief executive officer of the bank.

"We started this bank for our children and grandchildren. We are fortunate because of what our forefathers have done for this area, building a legacy, that we can present to future generations."

He is a native of Springdale. He was born July 3, 1947, and graduated from Springdale High School. Don received a bachelor of science degree

in business administration from the University of Arkansas at Fayetteville.

Also, he served a two-year stint in the Army, earning the rank of a commissioned officer. When he returned to Northwest Arkansas, Don pursued a master's of business administration degree from the UA.

His career started at Willis Shaw Express in Elm Springs, then nine years at First State Bank in Springdale. He's been in banking ever since.

Don met Carol Lynn while in junior high school. The couple dated in high school, then he attended the university.

"We didn't date when I was a senior, and as soon as I saw she was dating college boys, we got back together."

They have been married 38 years.

The area has dramatically changed since Don lived in Springdale, mainly in available opportunities, he said.

"When I was a freshman at the UA, the adviser said students who were getting college degrees in Northwest Arkansas were wasting their time. Now, we are able to give our kids a good education and the opportunity to find careers here."

Derek Gibson works with his father at the bank as vice president of commercial lending.

The whole community has come together to support the Gibsons in their work with the foundation, Don said.

"We have really been blessed by a tremendous amount of support from all ages in Northwest Arkansas. It's encouraging to see even younger adults come in to champion the cause and be a part of it all."

SAVE THE DATE

Organization: The Ryan Gibson Foundation

Event: The sixth annual One Particular Harbor fundraiser for leukemia research

When: 6:30 p.m. Saturday

Venue: Fayetteville Town Center

Other information: Sponsorships are still available. Tickets are \$75 and may be purchased by calling 571-1313.

RYAN'S STORY

Donald Ryan Gibson was born Nov. 13, 1975, in Fayetteville. He graduated from Springdale High School and earned many academic accolades

while there.

His achievements continued both academically and philanthropically while he attended college at Southern Methodist University in Dallas.

In July 1995, after his freshman year, Ryan was diagnosed with chronic myelogenous leukemia.

Ryan graduated as an honors student with a bachelor's degree in biological sciences and minors in psychology and electrical engineering. He was a member of the Pi Kappa Alpha Fraternity and was named National Outstanding Pike for October 1995.

After graduation in the fall of 2001, "Gibbie" worked in Dallas at Baylor Health System on a joint cancer research project with the University of Texas Southwestern while waiting to begin medical school.

He had been accepted to the University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences, University of Texas Southwestern Medical School and Duke University School of Medicine.

Ryan was active in the Leukemia & Lymphoma Society, both in Texas and in Northwest Arkansas, through bone marrow drives, fundraising and counseling of cancer patients.

He died on Jan. 30, 2001, at the age of 25 of a bacterial infection following his long struggle with leukemia.

Source: Ryan Gibson Foundation

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