



american association
of
suicidology

NEWSLINK

Winter, 2012

“Life Teammates, Spreading Love, Hope & The Will To Live”

By John Trautwein

Reprint For The Will To Live Foundation



By John Trautwein

My name is John Trautwein, and my lovely wife Susie and I have been told that we are members of “The Saddest Club On Earth.” On the 15th of October in 2010, just a little over two years ago, I held my lifeless son Will in my arms. That was the day I became a member of this club. My oldest child, the first of four beautiful children that my wife and I had so lovingly created, was gone. He had killed himself.

At 15 years old, and 3 months into his freshman year at Northview High School in the northern Atlanta suburb of Johns Creek, GA, our Will was unable to see the love and hope that surrounded him. His will to live disappeared. Whether it disappeared for a long time, or for a moment, does not matter; the fact is it disappeared, and a family and a community were left to pick up the “light” that once shown so brightly in Will.

Will was strong, popular, handsome, smart, athletic, and musical. He was a leader among his friends, and he had an army of them. They were stunned, and his brothers, sister, and parents were shocked and devastated. “How could this have happened? He was so happy, he had it all.” “How can this happen to this boy, this loving happy family, this community?” Those were the questions that were asked repeatedly for months after his death. In fact, they are still asked today, two years later.



Will Trautwein (center)
with his friends just
months before his death

Love, hope, and a will to live! Every parent strives hard to instill these three very important ingredients into the minds and hearts of their children. My wife and I believed we were truly doing that every day, and now Will was gone. Since that dreadful day in October of 2010, we have survived one day at a time, carried by our faith, our family, and a complete submersion in love from our friends that has been nothing short of miraculous. As a result, my wife and, I with the help of our current and former friends—who we called our “Life Teammates®” —formed The Will to Live Foundation, Inc. This foundation is a nonprofit 501(c)(3) organization based in Georgia with the following mission:

To create a non-profit foundation that is dedicated to improving the lives and the “Will to Live” of teenagers everywhere. Through education, motivation, consultation, charity, support and most importantly, love and fellowship, we will work for and through these young adults to help them always find the “Good” in life and a “Will to live” through all of life’s trials.

For the past two years, I’ve lived without seeing or hearing my son, the source of so much happiness, pride, and joy in my life. During this time, as I’ve looked back on his life and spent quality time with so many of his closest friends, it has become very clear to me that my son was even more of a wonderful human being than I had realized. Will and I were close—we loved each other and we told each other that every day—but what I didn’t realize is how much he loved everyone. He never had a bad thing to say about anyone; he accepted everyone and everyone accepted him. He was as close to the perfect teammate as I can imagine. Thus, it was obvious to my wife and me in just what direction this Will To Live Foundation must go!



As a former professional baseball player, I realize that for as long as I can remember, I have been on a team, some sort of team where I had the wonderful opportunity to share a common goal and dream with others! My wife shared the same sentiment; as a two-sport athlete at the University of Virginia (lacrosse and field hockey), she too had grown up on teams. What I didn't realize in my younger days was that I was also developing life-long relationships with my teammates: my "life friends" or perhaps, my "Life Teammates."

As a multiple sport athlete from grade school through high school, I started to form these Life Teammate bonds. These bonds continued to form throughout my college baseball career and into my professional baseball career as well. These teammates have continued to be there for me not just on the field, but also off the field. They were at my graduation parties, they were at my engagement party, they were in my wedding, they were godfathers to my kids, and they were there for me during the darkest hours of my life, the death of my son.

Perhaps the greatest realization that both my wife and I realized was this simple fact: The best friends we ever made in our life were those friends we made when we were in our teenage years, when we were Will's age! Will had so many wonderful friends who loved him dearly, had he only recognized that!

The more we thought about it, the more sense this Life Teammates concept made. We had to find a way to get these to be more willing to communicate to each other—both in speaking and listening. We know it is easier for kids to turn to each other than to the "trusted adults" in their lives. It's simply human nature, so let's promote and encourage this communication.

Will was more about the team than himself, more about relationships than winning. He was all about love and being there for his friends! So with a motto of, "For the kids, through the kids and by the kids!," the Will To Live Foundation strives to help kids recognize the love that exists today in their lives—the love that is all around them, even when they don't see it!

As the foundation has grown these past two years, the Life Teammates concept has been an instrumental tool in not only spreading awareness of teen suicide and educating communities about this epidemic, but also in getting the message out to the teens that love is all around us and we need to recognize and embrace that wonderful fact.

Who are your Life Teammates, and do they know it? We have reached many kids with this question and education. As of today, hundreds of teams and over 10,000 kids in America representing lacrosse, baseball, soccer, volleyball, wrestling, as well as youth groups, school clubs, boy scouts, and girl scouts have been involved in the foundation. All proudly spread the "Love ya man" life teammates message and wear wristbands and decals spreading this proactive positive message. They also help spread awareness of the stigmatized issues of mental health, depression, and suicide.

The Will To Live Foundation is striving to give the kids the opportunity to work together as teammates in spreading the suicide awareness message as well. In February of next year, the third annual "Where There's A Will, There's A Way 5K" fun run will be held in Johns Creek, GA. This event, which was created, organized, and implemented by the kids, has raised over \$60,000 in the past two years. All of this is done "for the kids, through the kids, and by the kids!" Over 1,000 runners participate each year and, along with the "WillStock Teen Music Festival," it has become a signature event of the Will To Live Foundation.



The “Where There’s A Will, There’s a Way 5K” fun run draws over 1,000 runners each year. They run to spread awareness and increase the love, hope, and will to live of teens everywhere!



John Trautwein (center) with the kids before the “WillStock Teen Music Festival” in September of 2012.



The Kids of the Will To Live Foundation at Will-Stock 2012 holding up their signs of love and hope.



Will to Live Foundation decals that promote the mission of the foundation.

In two years, this foundation has worked with the kids and raised over \$200,000, which has gone right back into the community to support various non-profit suicide awareness, education, counseling, and prevention organizations. The foundation has even partnered with Atlanta's Fulton County schools and Screening For Mental Health (a Massachusetts-based non-profit organization) to implement the Signs of Suicide training program in every school in Fulton County in 2012 and 2013. The goal of this partnership is to ensure that money raised by the kids is going back into the community to educate adults, so that when these same kids are struggling, they can be better supported. This is a wonderful "circle of hope" that has inspired me, my family, and our community.

The foundation is also catching the attention of groups and organizations nationwide. The state of Georgia has recognized its accomplishments on the senate and house floors; there have also been stories done by CBS News, CNN, the Boston Globe, the Big 10 Network, Fox News, and Fox Sports. The foundation's "Life Teammate" wristbands have been worn by members of the Yankees and Red Sox in both Yankee Stadium and Fenway Park. The Will To Live bowtie from the "Bow Tie Cause" organization was even worn by Fox Sports announcer Ken Rosenthal during baseball's game of the week last August in Yankee Stadium. Thus, it is clear the message is being well received and people are realizing it needs to be heard, everywhere!



As a survivor of suicide, as a member of the saddest club on earth, I discovered that suicide and mental health issues are simply not talked about—they are pushed under the table or in the closet. We feel we have found a positive and proactive way to talk about it, a positive way to spread this important message of awareness.

Through the Will to Live Foundation and our Life Teammates® concept, we are indeed achieving our mission of increasing the will to live of teenagers everywhere, and we know our son Will would be proud

As we teach the kids to say, "Love ya man!"

John Trautwein is the President and Co-Founder of the Will To Live Foundation, which he founded with his wife, Susie, after the death of their oldest son to suicide. John was a college and professional baseball player, and uses sports to promote peer support and suicide prevention. For more information on the foundation, please visit <http://www.will-to-live.org/>.
