



HEROES COME IN EVERY SIZE

Every family has their hardships, heartbreaks, times of joy and celebration. My family was no exception. However, the life-altering events took a terrible bite out of our family that was almost impossible to overcome and shadowed all our days forever.

Because of this event, I have two real heroes: my aunt, Margaret Sandroni-Szot (better known to me as Aunt None, pronounced “non-knee”) and her son, Jeff, who turned 36 on July 13th.

Let me briefly give you some background of our family before that terrible event took place.

The story starts back in 1965 when Aunt None



(Margaret) and I were both pregnant with our first children. I was only 21 and she was 26. At the time, doctors didn't have sonograms or anything remotely close to letting us know what sex our children would be. You had to guess if they would be boys or girls by the way you carried them, relying on all the “Old Wives Tales” such as, “You're carrying it mighty low,” or “It sure is moving around a lot.” That would indicate a boy or visa versa. My aunt went into labor first in November, 1965. She had a cute little blond headed baby, Roger Derek Sandroni. A month later, in December, I had my first son, Guy Emory Sheffield. Of course the labors were hard and since I was living a hundred miles from my Aunt None, we only had a few visits those first few months. Soon, my husband and I moved back to the “Delta” to be close to family.

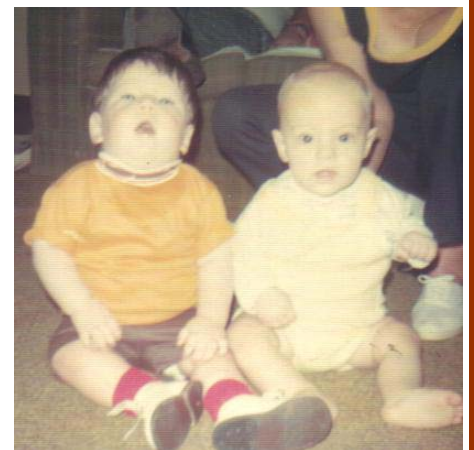


After the move both babies were inseparable, learning to crawl, walk, talk and play together. Those were the days before “Pampers” or “Baby-Wipes,” so clean-ups and times were a lot harder. Both my aunt, who was only five years older than me, and I were constant companions as were the two babies. Time passed and the kids grew fast into toddlers.

Five years later in 1971, she and I both become pregnant again within a few months of each other. We both endured the long months sharing the many body altering months; the running to the bathroom, the not being able to see your feet and those awful “Moo-Moo” dresses. Her second son, Jeffery Sandroni, was born in July. Three months later, in October, my

second son, Heath, was born. Again we went through the same baby stuff, crawling, toddling, talking and walking. These four kids spent all their spare time together being best friends. Derek was like a little Tom Sawyer with freckles and reddish blond hair. He was so sweet and quiet, very bashful. He loved baseball and was a little scrapper on the field. Jeff was dark and stout, really cute with straight hair like the little Dutch Boy. All four boys had individual personalities but loved being together.

If we'd only have known what was ahead, we would have wrapped all four children in a cocoon and never let them out. You just never know what the future holds so cherish each moment of every day like it might be the last.



By 1973, I'd gotten a divorce and moved off to the big city of Memphis to make a fresh start. It was only 100 miles from home but I didn't get back nearly enough. Usually, I'd meet my ex-husband half way so he could have the boys for the weekend or sometimes my mother would come. In those days, I felt Shaw, Ms. was stifling and there was nothing to do!

The kids didn't get to see each other as often but in the summer, they usually spent weeks at a time at my mother's while school was out. All enjoyed summer baseball and going to the local swimming pool and riding their bikes.



(Jeff and Heath before the accident.)



(Guy is shown with Jeff and Heath.)



(Heath showing the love he had for Jeff.)



(One Christmas with Guy, Derek and another cousin.)

It was on a summer day in 1977 that it happened.

My two sons were visiting their grandmothers and for some fateful reason, they didn't get with Derek or Jeff that day but stayed around my parent's farm. It possibly saved their lives because normally, they would be together going to the pool. That day, Jeff and Derek were playing with some other cousins and decided to race their bikes through the little town of Shaw. There wasn't much traffic. But one car was all it took.

Never will I forget the overwhelming devastation I felt when I heard. I was typing away at my secretarial job in Memphis when the phone rang. It's branded in my heart for all time. Nell Sandroni, my aunt's sister-in-law and neighbor called me. There'd been a terrible accident. My heart dropped to my stomach. The lady said, Derek had been killed and Jeff wasn't expected to live. Other details didn't register until later. So much shock and pure physical-like pain went throughout my body; I couldn't even think or breathe. All I remember is laying my head down on the typewriter and wailing. There were people around me but I don't remember them. Somehow I drove home through city traffic but how I'll never know. Then I don't know how I made the two hour trip alone back to the Delta. When you hurt so bad inside, all you want to do is curl up into a ball. So holding onto a steering wheel was an almost impossible feat. Somehow I must have driven because there was no one in Memphis I could turn to for help that day.

Little Derek was only 12 and Jeff was six on that terrible afternoon....the same age my boys; just sweet, sweet little souls who never hurt anyone. In an instance, the world caved in.



(My mother, Guy, my brother Joey, Derek and Aunt None on Guy's 1st birthday.)



(Guy and Derek at one year old.)



(Aunt None and Derek.)



(Guy and Derek)



(Aunt Joan, Guy, their great-grandpa, and Derek.)



(Guy and Derek at about eight or nine.)

Later, I found out what had happened. Both Derek and Jeff were on one bicycle with Jeff behind. They had to go over the bayou to their grandmother's to get their suits first. They were with some other cousins riding their bikes through the side streets and decided to go in different directions to beat each other getting there...as kids will do. In those days, crime was a rare occurrence, so it was safe to let them go on their own.

As they were racing down this quiet street, a stop sign loomed up. Their bike's brakes did work because they were skidding on gravel and the momentum sent them through where just at that same instant; a car was traveling at about 40 miles an hour. The car hit them with such force Derek was sent a ways down the road and Jeff landed near the bicycle. People in their houses hearing the noise rushed to call 911 and try to assist before the paramedics could get there.

An ambulance was dispatched but before it came, my Aunt None arrived on the scene. People tried to hold her back but she was hysterically reaching out as hard as she could to go to her boys. Finally, the ambulance loaded both Derek and Jeff in it but there was no room for my aunt. She had to ride along behind it. It was speeding down the Highway 61 with lights and siren going when a car pulled out in front of it. The driver swerved to avoid hitting the car, but ended up crumpled in a ditch. The driver suffered a broken leg. By the time another ambulance got there, precious minutes had passed. We'll never know how much more harm Derek and Jeff sustained since time was of the essence. Finally sweet little shy 12 year old Derek arrived at the hospital where he was pronounced dead a few minutes after arrival. We'll never know if possibly he could have lived. We think not because he was so badly injured but we just hope he didn't suffer too much. Jeff was in such bad condition, they had to send him via another ambulance to Greenville, Ms. where there were neurosurgeons on duty. Jeff was in such critical condition they had to be extra careful with everything because his brain was swelling. His kidneys were failing but they couldn't give him IV's because of the swollen brain. Every organ needed special attention but too much of one thing could kill him. So, they didn't expect him to live 24 hours, and then it was 48 hours. After three days, there was a glimmer of hope. The surgeons took out a large portion of his skull to ease the swelling. His internal and other broken bones had to wait.

I remember crying as much for the pain Aunt None was feeling as for all the other losses. How does a mother give up her first born? How does she cope with a funeral and a severely critical little six year old? How much pain can a mother suffer? My aunt showed me and the world how brave she could be.

The days before Derek's funeral were filled with friends and family coming and going. Hurting inside, you're too numb to do anything. You cry, cry some more and then some more but that doesn't ease the pain any. Aunt None hadn't had a chance to go see how Jeff was doing and finally, I talked her into it saying that, "He needs you now. Go. Don't worry about the funeral. We'll hold it as long as we need to."



(Jeff is shown in his wheel chair months after he came home from the hospital.)

We finally held the funeral for Derek. It had to be closed coffin because the injuries were so devastating, but they allow the families to have a private viewing. Even though my oldest son, Guy, was only twelve at the time, he was like a grown man. It affected him the most because Derek was like his brother, his very best friend. He said, "Mama, I AM going to see Derek. He was my best friend and I've got to say goodbye." And he did with the strength of an adult. In fact, I think he grew up then. The funeral home did a great job making Derek look good. The funeral itself is a blur. I know we rallied around my Aunt None and Uncle Dolly, but she was so strong. We knew her pain, but she held it all inside and was able to function throughout all the days of mourning, then the hour by hour vigil at the hospital for Jeff. I've never ever seen anyone stronger in my life. She was able to talk about Derek and all her

memories of him and soothe the grief of everyone around her. She straightened her shoulders and started the long process of getting Jeff better.

Meanwhile, Jeff, who was only six, was in the Greenville Hospital so broken up. At one critical point, they flew him by helicopter to Jackson, Mississippi because the Greenville Hospital didn't have an MRI machine and his internal brain and body needed to be analyzed. No one from our area had ever flown in a helicopter and it made big news in the paper because it was an Army helicopter specially brought in to help. Time was locked into waiting and holding our breaths. Our hearts felt like heavy lead was holding them down.

Jeff stayed in a coma for four months having to be fed through the stomach. Every day was another challenge. Fluid levels had to be exact. His brain had to shrink; they did not know if he'd ever waken or if he did, would he be a vegetable? I don't know how my aunt survived that ordeal, but she was at the hospital 24/7. Jeff got to go home before he came out of the coma. They taught my mother and aunt how to change bandages, use the feeding tube and clean it, and generally be his around the clock nurses.

The long days and nights stretched into months. Finally at the third month, Jeff woke up. He asked in a heavily garbled way, where Derek was. All that we could tell him was Derek was in Heaven. From the moment Jeff woke up, he had to be heavily medicated because of seizures, pain and dozens of other things wrong with his body. He was having the seizures all the time and was so frightful. The doctors had to experiment with different doses and types of medicines to treat him. Meanwhile, his poor body was still broken up. His arm was never able to be set properly, and Jeff was paralyzed on his left side. Finally, the prognosis was that his mentality was stuck somewhere about seven years old. His mind would not grow and they couldn't predict how long he'd live. They never expected him to live to adulthood since there were just too many things wrong. He fooled them. Through the years there've been countless doctors, rehabs, and specialist, even those who had to fit him with special shoes.

Yes, that year was the darkest year of our whole family's lives. But time helps and through the years, Jeff kept learning how to do small things. Nothing major but he learned to walk, his speech was garbled but we learned to understand him. The years kept going by. Jeff's smiling face was a blessing. He never asked for anything. His favorite things are to watch TV, listen to music and just sit and listen to us.

A year or so after the accident, the town named their local little league ball field after Derek (the town has since shrunk and there are no longer any ball teams and the ball field has grown up with weeds). Derek isn't far from our minds though. We always talked about him and his picture hangs proudly in his mother's den.

Meanwhile, both my son's grew up playing baseball with so many of their games were dedicated to Jeff and Derek. Their best friends were always in their hearts, first in high school and then college. Once in college, Guy wrote a story about his hero, Jeff, about how brave, sweet and innocent he was. The story was published in the college's annual. Guy and Heath have tender hearts and our family never, ever parts without the words, "I love you" being said cause it might be the last time we see each other. We know first hand how fragile seconds can be.

Today, Jeff is thirty-six, and still always smiling, always so patient. He'll sit in a room of adults for hours on end without moving, just watching. Occasionally he'll hear some part of conversation that makes him laugh. He laughs out loud; sometimes it seems he loses his breath he's laughing so hard.

Jeff does not ask to be entertained or amused. He never again got a chance to play with toys, run or ride a bicycle. He was locked in his own world with hours on end sitting quietly in a room with his mother. She did everything she could to entertain him but he's happy just being. His speech is still very hard to understand unless you know him. He cannot use one arm and drags one leg to walk because one leg is shorter than the other. He's been falling a lot.

Once he fell in the bathroom with his whole weight against the door. With superhuman strength, my aunt (who is now in her late 60's) squeezed her arm through the crack of the door, somehow lifting Jeff up enough to open the door. She still doesn't know how she was able to do it. Now, Jeff never shuts the bathroom door in case he falls again.

For almost 30 years Aunt None has dressed him, bathed him, cut up his food, shaved him (since he started) helped him go to the bathroom and untold other things humans need to survive. He can't wear regular shirts or t-shirts since he can't lift his arms to put them on. Shoes have to be specially fitted, as does pants and other garments. His teeth are deformed and his eyesight reflects the paralysis in one eye. His medications are staggering in amounts and very expensive. Through the years, they struggled by fighting bureaucracy for the disabled. It took forever to declare him disabled so Social Security could help with the many bills. There are so many areas that the government falls down in helping the disabled.

Jeff never learned to read even though he can remember every sports stat imaginable. In my heart, I know better school programs could have helped. They have little jobs for the disabled but pay them pittances even though they were "working" full-time. I remember one job where a bus would pick Jeff up and take him to this place and he'd put rubber worms (fishing) in a sack, maybe five to a sack. That would go on all day, day after day. It was supposed to make him feel "important." Jeff never complained. It did get him out of the house with other disabled people who he enjoyed getting to know. He made some friends which he sorely needed.





Until you've have a disabled child, you'll never know the hardships they have to go through. Jeff was so proud of walking. Once, a few years ago another aunt and uncle, Aunt None with her new husband (My uncle died about ten years ago) and Jeff came to Florida and we went all went to SeaWorld. Jeff absolutely wouldn't let me get him a wheelchair. He wanted to prove he would walk it. We slowly made our way around the park which is huge, resting as often as we

could and constantly asking Jeff if he was Ok. "Yes, I'm Okaaaay," he'd say. You have to see him walk to know what a struggle it is. He has to slightly hop and drag the other leg. So, later that night we took off Jeff's shoes and found blisters on both feet. We all wanted to cry for that brave boy who wanted to prove he could do it. He hadn't complained one time.

(Jeff and Aunt None with Uncle Johnny, Billie Jean and me, Guy Ann during Jeff's trip to Florida.)



The sadness stays with you through the years. My heart goes out to my aunt because she never ever showed her grief like most of us would. Her strength and compassion has been held together for Jeff. She has never ever let Jeff out of her sight except for school and work. They both have helped shape the hearts of the rest of our family. Aunt None and Jeff laugh a lot. I'm looking forward to being nearby to share in some more new memories before it's too late.

One of the things I want to do is take Jeff to a movie. Jeff has never been inside a movie theater and I think it would be a treat. I want them to visit and show them whatever happiness I can add to their lives.

Yes, Aunt None and Jeff are my heroes. Jeff is a joy to be around. He loves being teased and joked with and when he laughs, we all have to laugh with him because he is so consumed

with joy!

Even though a very tragic event took place, our family learned to love unconditionally, to love now and never go to bed angry. We've learned that God has reasons we don't know about and that there is always something good with the bad.

Through all this, my aunt has been so brave and so devoted making every moment of Jeff's life as happy as possible...and he is.

(Shown are Jeff and Aunt None on their last trip to Memphis to visit with us.)





(Me with my hero, Aunt None.)

**With all my love,
Guy Ann Sheffield
10/31/07**