

William's Story: Student with Muscular Dystrophy Leaves Lasting Impression on Many

Written by Debbie Heide

Thursday, 03 May 2012 15:26 - Last Updated Thursday, 03 May 2012 16:01

Editor's note: The following first-person account was written by Debbie Heide, the transportation director at Selah School District located about 140 miles southeast of Seattle. In September of 2010, she shared with us the story of a student with a disability who quickly became loved by her, her staff and members of the Washington State Association for Pupil Transportation (WAPT). We published in article in our [November 2010 magazine issue](#), but want to dust off the entire letter and share with our readers this touching an example of the difference transportation professionals can make in the lives of students, and vice versa. Heide calls it "William's Story."



William Ayala "Five years ago, I came to work at Selah School District in Selah, Wash. One of my first things to do here was to ride all of the routes and get to know the drivers on a personal level. There was one particular day, which I will never forget for the rest of my life. I was on a special needs bus when a student by the name of William got on the bus and introduced himself to me.

Along the ride we chatted about several things but one thing was important to William that day. It was his birthday. So here we start with a little family history. William is in a wheel chair because he was born with muscular dystrophy. He started out the first part of his life walking. Slowly he moved to a walker, then his illness progressed to the point that he was in a wheel chair. William had to have a steel rod put in his back because he couldn't hold himself up in his chair.

It didn't matter to William. He was happy to be alive and celebrating his birthday. What he told me that day almost brought me to tears. I couldn't cry because I knew that William wouldn't want me to feel pity for him. This is what he said:

"Tami (to his bus driver), you know I am lucky to still be here. The doctors didn't expect me to live very long. And you know what else? I lived longer than my sister did."

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There was complete silence on that bus. I asked him what happened to his sister. He told me a long story of how she died of pneumonia when she was very little. He said that she should have lived longer than he did but he had long out lived her.

About 15 minutes later we arrived at William's house. It was an older farm house with a dirt walk way that William had to travel. It was also a long steep hill. That didn't stop William. At the top of the hill was another person sitting in a wheel chair. It was William's father. Several years ago, right after he got out of the military, he was diving into a pool and had an accident. He was paralyzed from the waist down. I couldn't believe it myself.

William was the last student to drop off that day. It was such a long and quiet ride back to the bus garage. I couldn't take my mind off of what I just heard.

From that day on, I fell in love with that family. William's Mom is my true hero. She took care of both William and Dad. She had a full time job as well to support them. She also had animals to take care of. For such a little tiny thing, she was tough. She never complained. *Never!* She loved William unconditionally.

On a rare occasion, Dad or Mom would call to tell me if William was sick and that they didn't need a bus. We would get into long conversations. If his bus driver was sick, I'd be the first person to want to go out and sub on the route so that I could visit with William. William loved school buses. He loved the drivers and the drivers loved him. He would wave at the passing buses and they would wave back. Everyone here knew William's family story.

During William's junior year, I asked him if he would like to come down here to my office and help out. He was excited. I had the bus drop him off as soon as he got out of school. Mom came down at closing time to pick him up. I let William dispatch on the radio. Of course, I had to hold down on the receiver because William could not coordinate his hand to move that far. That radio would go like crazy. The drivers knew that he was here and they called in continually with some of the craziest things just so that William could respond to them on the radio.

My mechanic took William out to the shop to show him around. William was amazed. He wanted to learn more. At that time he told us that he wanted to be a graphic designer. He wasn't sure if it were something he could do because he couldn't move his hand much. I told him that I

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thought he could.



William receives his new computer from his friends in Selah and the Central Washington Association for Pupil Transportation. His senior year, he enrolled himself in an engineering class and he was on his way. It was then that our local Central Washington Association for Pupil Transportation chapter heard the story about William. Between our drivers here and our local chapter, we bought William a laptop computer, printer, paper and some graphic design programs. We kept it a secret until the day we gave it to him.

Mom and Dad brought him down to one of our chapter meetings and we presented him with the gift. William's family (I mean about 20 people) came to the event. Everyone cried. William was so proud. The first thing he planned to do was design T-shirts for the drivers. He even made a couple. The family couldn't afford much in the way of supplies, but this is something he wanted to do.

After William graduated from high school his mom tried to enroll him in a graphic design institute here in Yakima, Wash., but they could not accommodate his needs. I think it really broke his heart.

From that time on, he battled several illnesses. He found himself in the hospital fighting for his life time and time again, never giving up. I went to see him one time when he was in the critical care unit, and he had several tubes in his mouth. He had needles everywhere, and we didn't think he was going to make it. But William had a fight in him like no other person. He survived. In fact he said at least four to five times that he was fighting to stay alive. He would always come out of the hospital just to say, "See I told you so. I told you I would make it."

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This last year (2010), William spent nine months in critical care. He again beat the odds and was able to come home. He called me on the day he arrived and said that he wanted to come and see us but that he had to make sure that he was well.

A couple of months later, William came down with an infection that finally took his life at the age of 22. He told his mom that whatever happened to him, like if he died, he wanted her to call us here at transportation right away and not to forget. William died on Sunday, June 27, 2010. On that particular day, it was the state bus rodeo competition. We (the little town of Selah) were the host of the event. I believe that William was there watching as well.

When I got into my office on Monday morning the 27th, there was a frantic call on my message machine. It was William's mom. It was the saddest message I had ever gotten on the phone. It broke my heart. It wasn't until Tuesday morning that I was able to call the house. Dad answered the phone and we talked. In all of the time that I had known the family, they made it clear that they didn't want any handouts from anyone. They were full of pride. It was tough to get dad's permission at first when we bought the computer. On this particular day, Dad seemed stressed. I told him that I would like to come out and visit and he said that he and his wife would love it. I asked him if there was any way that I could help them, and he paused and said, "I don't know what we are going to do about William's funeral. We need any help anyone can give us."

I could tell that at that time he was setting aside his pride and that he truly needed the help. As soon as I got off of the phone, I immediately called Peggy Emhoff (WAPT secretary) and told her about what William's dad had to say. I knew it was the last day of the WAPT conference, and I asked if I could get up and tell William's story and ask for help from my extended transportation family. I had never spoken in front of 300 people before. I was very afraid. Once I got up there I knew what I had to do and I just did it.

The words just zipped out of my mouth and I told them everything. I did this during a brunch. Typically when speakers talk during a brunch, it is difficult to hear over the clanging of the silverware and dishes. I swear to you it was drop-dead silent. People were listening. At the end of the story I asked for help. It didn't have to be much, but help is what this family needed so badly. There were women and men in that facility that had tears in their eyes. People were coming up to me with 50- and 20-dollar bills. The staff that was serving the meals also donated money. There was also a 50/50 drawing at the end of the conference. That person won \$180. She donated it to William's family.

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When I first walked into the building I had \$116 in sunshine fund money given to me by my drivers. When I walked out of the conference I had a total of over \$1,700. It took no more than 15 minutes to raise money for this family that was truly in need but it will give me a lifetime of memories of what great people we have in this industry.

When I presented this to William's mom and dad on the behalf of all the transportation in the state of Washington, she just dropped to the couch and cried. She was very appreciative of the help.

What I would love to see is that there be a scholarship fund set up for a driver to attend your conference every year in honor of William Ayala. I know that this would make William and his family very proud.

Throughout this I have learned that you can do anything. You just got to do it. I have also learned that people in our industry have a huge caring and loving heart. We don't make a huge amount of money in our profession, but when someone is in need, we would give anything we have to help out one of our kids. Thank you to our 'Washington State Association for Pupil Transportation' family. You are the greatest."

More: Read William Ayala's [online obituary](#) .