

By every metric imaginable, Garrett Bennett, 13, should not be alive today. A perfect storm of several life-threatening diseases had doctors predicting he wouldn't make it past 2 years old. "Several is an understatement," Garrett Bennett joked.

Garrett Bennett was born with a severe form of genetic celiac disease. His food limitations are endless. He can't consume any food with trace amounts of gluten. Just one slip-up could prove fatal.

"For me, it's more like, 'Well, would you like to die? If so, eat the bread, but if you don't want to die, stay away from the bread,'" Garrett Bennett said in jest.

His mother, Sarah Bennett, elaborated that her son is extremely allergic to most eggs, starches and sugars. He also has to synthetically add nutrients found in meat to his diet. On top of his dietary restrictions, Garrett Bennett lives with autism and alternating hemiplegia, which triggers paralysis, strokes and migraines.

The future has no choice but to look bleak when dealt those cards, but Garrett Bennett wasn't going down without a fight. With the discovery he could reliably consume raw goat milk, Garrett Bennett found new life.

"Garrett lives on a feeding tube, and I was having a lot of complications with insurance and formula. Around about the same time my friends were having a party, and they were cooking goat meat," Sarah Bennett said. "One of them had gotten into some adult beverages, so they decided not to cook that goat. Him and his cousins fell in love with it. We took in the goat, and his name is Don Julio."

After struggling to find gluten-free raw goat milk, a family friend recommended reaching out to Nassau County's 4-H branch, a youth organization in the National Institute of Food and Agriculture.

"We explained the situation and Miss Kelsey (Irvine) and the Farm Bureau got together and said, 'Hey, let's solve this kid's problem. Let's get him a goat,'" Sarah Bennett said.

Garrett Bennett was gifted a goat named Ariat in February 2021, but it was going to take some time before she would be ready to produce milk. In the meantime, the Bennetts received the correct form of goat milk from another farmer.

"We were really lucky that 4-H took us in under their wing and basically taught us everything and put us in connection. Once Garrett kind of got the idea, he went with it," Sarah Bennett said. "He has really expanded on a lot of things, and he really wants to be able to help other people that are like him that need gluten-free milk, or are interested in working with goats or building a farm."

Garrett Bennett offers consultations three nights a week to people interested in raising their own goats. Sarah Bennett admitted that it doesn't bring in a lot of money, but it does allow Garrett Bennett to share his passion with the world.

Garrett Bennett's grandparents serve as his secondary caregivers. His grandfather was especially instrumental in raising Garrett Bennett to be a go-getter regardless of his conditions.

"Garrett has really honestly grown up in an environment that is solely based on entrepreneurship. He started out at 3 years old doing banking with granddad. He started doing stocks, bonds, mutual funds, all of that. Started trading in the market with him," Sarah Bennett said.

At 4, he scored 125 on an I.Q. test. Three years later, further testing showed Garrett Bennett was so far advanced he could test out of high school, but he begrudgingly still has to twiddle his thumbs in class because "legally he has to."

"For fun, he takes some basic college courses. He doesn't get any credit for it. They're certificatetype

programs," Sarah Bennett said. "He logged onto Northwestern University's publications on cat midwifery, and (he) learned (about) that because he had a cat that was pregnant. This was seven years ago."

On April 11, Garrett Bennett was recognized by the Nassau County Board of County Commissioners for launching his own business, Half-Pint Dairies. Like his grandfather before him, Garrett Bennett was well on his way to a life of entrepreneurship.

Garrett Bennett is quick to assert he didn't even Google how to start a business.

"It was just explained to me and I kind of comprehended it and expanded on it a bit and found other things I'd like to add to it from how other people had done it," he explained. "Less me Googling it and more me asking a person about how that would be easier to achieve or how it could be achieved in general, and then going from that and adding some details that I like to that."

Now living in Garrett Bennett's backyard are six Nigerian dwarf goats, five Cayuga ducks and two Chinese geese. The Bennetts also have a few Toulouse and Sebastopol geese.

"With Garrett, because of his conditions, he actually has a regular federal prescription to maintain them," Sarah Bennett said. "In order to maintain them, because we live in a neighborhood in Yulee, we had to get approval and permission, and that's what we ended up doing... Every animal that we have there, it is to an amount that covers his needs."

Every day, Garrett Bennett works tirelessly tending to his animals. Sometimes, he has to spend almost an hour just filling their pools and water bowls. He also goes around and pets all his geese because "they appreciate it." Sarah Bennett said his best friend is Steve, a half-black, half-white Chinese goose that follows him everywhere. Garrett Bennett once tried to enter Steve into a state fair, but was immediately disqualified because his goose wasn't purely white.

"You can make so many racist jokes out of that, but I chose not to," he humorously added.

He might not have struck gold there, but he sure did at Clay County's Agriculture Fair. Garrett Bennett won the Intermediate Showmanship Grand Champion belt buckle for excelling in poultry.

"According to Clay County, they don't really care. He's a Chinese goose, and that's good enough," he said. Garrett Bennett's passion for raising livestock extends far beyond his own desires. He's currently working with local 4-H agents to plan an eight-week goat clinic for summer 2023.

"We have to find sponsorship that can help fund that for all county kids, not just Nassau. The plan that Garrett had come up with was to open it up to all counties in Florida," Sarah Bennett said.

When he's not offering consultations or selling purebred Sebastopol goose eggs, Garrett Bennett bides his time learning about any and everything, from the Anglo Zanzibar War to Parmesan cheese production.

His strength in the face of terminal adversity still baffles his mother.

"His will to survive and his willingness to think outside of the box on how to manage his care, along with his family, has gotten him here," Sarah Bennett said.

The stakes are extremely high, without a safety net to rely on. Garrett Bennett is living on borrowed time. One might expect him to always be anxiously cautious, but he carries himself with a lighthearted candor, not dwelling too much on the negatives.

This is life or death, but like his goose, Steve, not all things are black and white. As Garrett Bennett cheekily says, "Some things are just for fun." mmahoney@fbnewsleader.com