

The Strength to Move Forward

By Jennifer Boutwell

Sitting at the dining room table across from my husband, the spring breeze making its way through the open windows, bringing with it the fresh scent of life budding in nature. I gaze over at Joshua Boutwell, the man that has spent the last 16 years of his life being a father to our children, a husband to me and a son to his parents. He's a pillar of strength, a listening ear, and a loyal companion. In some moments I catch a glimpse of the sadness that he tries to hold inside. His soft blue eyes meet mine and he gives me a nod.

He starts by telling me about his childhood and how he met James Porter, a man whose welcoming demeanor and loving personality quickly created a bond that was missing from Joshua's life. Joshua's biological father left when he was only three years old, so most of his life he didn't have a person to fill that role in his life.

Joshua met James when he was 13 years old, outside of the apartment complex that his mom had moved their family to. James was training a student in sword fighting techniques, "it was really cool to watch," Joshua remembers. He worked up the courage to ask the large, boisterous man if he could train him. James agreed but only if Joshua's parents gave permission. James went to meet Joshua's mother, surprised to find out that they already knew each other.

Joshua stayed with James when his mom moved out of the school district so that he could remain at the high school he was attending. "During that time, James stepped in as a father, he gave me rules, he taught me how to be a man and live up to my word, he taught me how a father should act," Joshua looks over at his children as he lets the memories wash over him, "He taught me how I should treat my own children by being a father to me when I didn't have one."

Joshua moved on after graduation, serving in the Army and doing a tour in Afghanistan. He returned to Oklahoma and stayed in touch with James, regularly visiting, attending game nights and when he moved farther away, he continued to stay in touch with James with phone calls and holiday visits. "For Christmas, he always bought my boys something and they were always excited to see Papa Bear," Joshua says with a smile.

Eventually, time and bad health decisions took its toll on James' health, he was diagnosed with diabetes, a disease that affects over 40 million people in the U.S. each year according to the CDC's National Diabetes Statistics Report. A few years later he lost his leg to the spread of an infection brought on by the disease. Once he lost his leg,

he couldn't physically do the things he used to enjoy, like martial arts, or walking around medieval fairgrounds and it weighed on him.

In 2025, the regular hospitalizations started, and in addition to his struggles with diabetes, James' liver wasn't doing well, and he needed to be placed on a transplant list. Unfortunately, his vice, his addiction to tobacco was holding him back. He couldn't be placed on a list unless he gave it up. His family and friends tried to convince him to make the changes for his health, but James stubbornly believed there wasn't a point.

The hospitalizations became more frequent, and each visit Joshua saw the man that had made such a big impact on his life slowly deteriorating before his eyes. "Everyone knew, including him, that he was dying. It was hard to see him struggling with his own mortality."

On March 16th, 2026, James was hospitalized, he had fluid in his abdomen that needed to be drained. Joshua went to visit and James didn't recognize him. He was having trouble with remembering his friends and family members. Joshua spent time with him and talked about movies they used to watch together and things that they used to do, "anything to keep his mind off the fact that he was dying."

The doctor gave them the news that James had six months to live, and they organized home hospice care for him. A week later, Joshua received a phone call saying that it seemed James had taken a turn for the worse. Joshua made plans to visit, and we went to see James the following Saturday, the 28th.

It was a different atmosphere in the home that was once so full of joy, life, and signs of James's hobbies. The glass case that once held displays of swords and dragons was covered with pill bottles. The table that Joshua once sat at for games with James and his friends was covered with medical equipment, and the living room where Joshua's children would excitedly open their Christmas presents while James smiled down lovingly on them was cleared out for James' medical bed. Looking at him on the bed, he looked so frail. He slept during our visit. Eventually, it was time for us to leave, Joshua walked up to James's bed, touched his shoulder, raised his voice and said, "Bye, Papa Bear. I love you." James' eyes fluttered. I would like to think, in that moment, he heard and recognized Joshua's voice knowing, the son he didn't share blood with loved him with all his heart. That night we received the call. James had died.

Life continues to move forward, but the space that that person took up feels empty without them. Joshua lost a father, a man that taught him about life and how to love in a way that he never understood. He is able to love his children fiercely because of the love James held for him. James will continue to be a source of strength for Joshua, "I plan to try to remember the good memories and what I can do to be a good example to my children like James was for me."

Some things he will remember about James, would be “his ability to accept everyone into his life as ‘family’ you weren’t just ‘Shawn’ you were ‘brother Shawn’ you weren’t just ‘Josh’ it was ‘my son Josh’, you were loved and you got his protection and loyalty.” He also plans to keep the memories of James love for 80’s martial arts movies alive by introducing them to his children.

Josh hopes to have a lasting impact on the life of those he loves as well by being present in the moments he has with his wife and children and setting an example of how to be a good father just as James did for him.

Works Cited

“National Diabetes Statistics Report.” *Centers for Disease Control and Prevention*, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, www.cdc.gov/diabetes/php/data-research/index.html.