

UNLIMITED

by Deborah DOVE



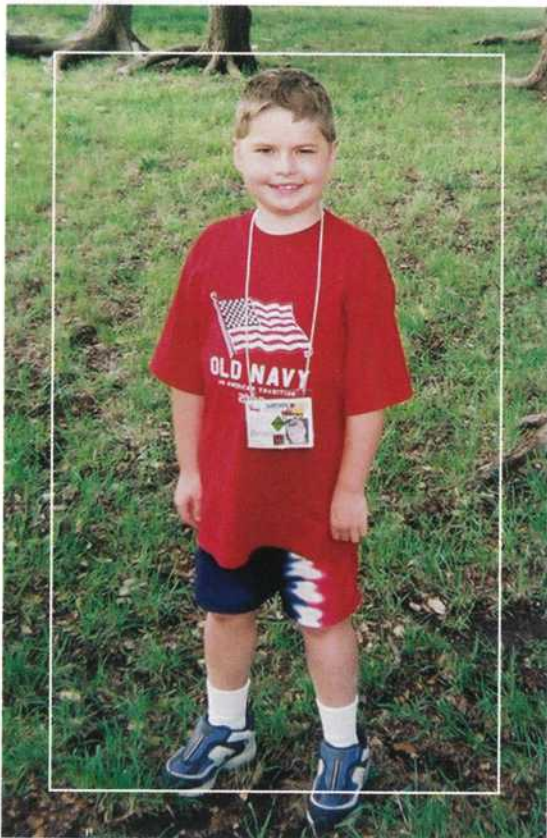
Born with Duchenne Muscular

Dystrophy, a rare disease characterized by progressive muscle weakness, Brian Spann is confined to a wheelchair with 11 percent lung capacity, unable to do anything physically for himself. As a result of a health emergency last December, he now also has a trach and a ventilator.

However, none of that has ever stopped him from living his best life. In fact, as Dr. Aaron Roberts, the surgeon who saved Brian's life earlier this year said, "Brian does more from his chair than most people do with two good arms and legs."

"Just because I'm in a wheelchair doesn't mean I can't participate," says Brian.

Of course, by most people's standards, Brian does far more than participate—he fully immerses himself in all that life has offered, whether it was marching in the Allen High School band in high school, ziplining at camp, becoming an Eagle Scout, earning his college degree or pursuing his calling to pastoral ministry. In the process, he sends a powerful message



to everyone whose life he touches. Regardless of your circumstances, life goes on. It's still full and meaningful. There's still a purpose.

Brian was born with the hereditary disease on August 5, 1994, but no one realized anything was wrong until he was in kindergarten. He fell a lot and had always been thin, without a lot of muscle tone. His parents, Kathy and David Spann, thought he was just a little behind developmentally. However, his pediatrician suspected Muscular Dystrophy, and right before his sixth birthday, a muscle biopsy confirmed that Brian had Duchenne's, a severe form of Muscular Dystrophy that only affects boys.

In second grade, he fell in the hallway and was unable to get up and had to wait for someone to walk by to help him. A solution was for Brian to begin using a manual wheelchair for long distances. He switched to an electric chair in fourth grade, and stopped walking completely around age eleven.

In Duchenne's, the muscles have no casing to hold them together, so over time they disintegrate. Unfortunately, all muscles in the body are affected, including the heart and lungs, and most people with Duchenne's don't live past their late teens or early twenties, although those numbers are changing with new advances in medicine as more is learned about the disease. In fact, within weeks



of Brian's diagnosis, scientists isolated the gene that causes Duchenne.

"This was a huge step," says Brian's mom, Kathy. "At the time, our world had fallen apart, and this was confirmation to me that it was going to be okay. I don't know if there will be a cure in Brian's lifetime, but there is hope, and certainly more good than bad that has come from Brian's life with this disease. All of the time there's confirmation from God that it's really okay." Already beating those odds, Brian is now twenty-four years old.

However, from the beginning, Brian never felt different. "I just knew I fell a lot," he says. "My parents raised me like it was just a part of my life. Of course, it affects a lot of things, but we don't live like that."

Their faith has always been integral to the family (which includes his parents, himself and his sister Bethany), and Brian doesn't shy away from explaining his disease from that perspective.

"As Christians, we often ask, 'Why would God do this?' But really, it has provided the opportunity for us to reach people and meet people we wouldn't have otherwise. A lot of the families that we have met who have the disease don't know that you can go to college and be successful and have jobs and careers and live



International Office at DBU as the assistant to the director and in the DBU Prayer Ministry office. Currently, he works for an online evangelism ministry called Need Him, where he counsels people going through hard times, answers questions about faith and the Bible, prays for

His first-grade teacher, Mary Helen Cornish, who put him on her back and ran the 50-yard dash, so he could participate in field day. His middle school art teacher, Ann Carroll, who figured out a way to put a pottery wheel on the table and guided his arms, so he could experience making pottery. Charles Pennington, who didn't bat an eye when Brian said he wanted to march in the Allen High School band, but accepted him enthusiastically and made a place for him on the field for every football game for four years. "And not off to the side. In the middle of the formation," adds Kathy. His clarinet teacher, Judi Altstatt, who rewrote all of his music so he could play with his left hand and "drive" with his right.

independently. I'm able to help people overcome those misconceptions and show them that, yes, you can do that even if you are disabled. And even when everything is going wrong, you can find peace and comfort that God has it all in His control."

"The only limitations I have are those I put on myself." He admits the pain is hard sometimes, but quickly adds, "There's nothing I can't do. I may just have to do it differently than others."

And he does it all.

During his years in Allen ISD, he not only attended school, but played in the band, was a PAL, served as the MDA Goodwill Ambassador for Texas, earned his Eagle Scout Award, and participated in the International Baccalaureate program—a rigorous and challenging academic program—at Allen High School.

He went on to attend college at Dallas Baptist University and, with the help of a health care attendant, he lived in a dorm during his freshman year, and in an apartment with a group of friends the next three years. He graduated with a Bachelor of Arts degree in communications and Christian studies in 2017.

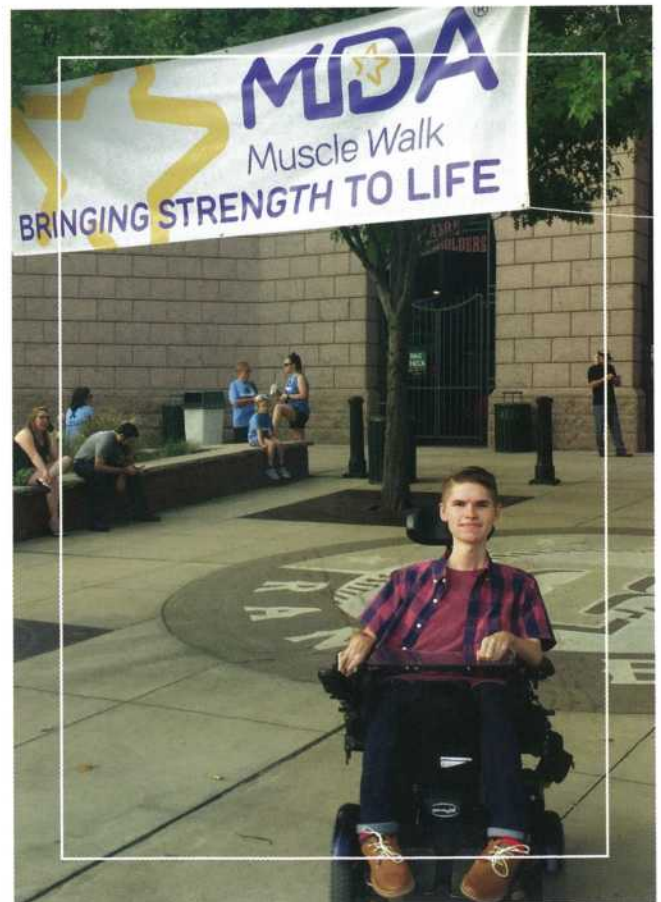
He has always worked—for Kids Club in high school, in the

them and shares his story as an example of hope and faith.

Currently a student at Dallas Theological Seminary, Brian is pursuing his master's degree (where he types thirty-page papers on his phone). Brian plans to work in pastoral ministry (in fact, he was just hired as the Special Needs Ministry Coordinator at Preston Hollow Presbyterian Church in Dallas), and dreams of writing a book, getting married and having children.

Like the story of the footprints in the sand, there have always been people along the way to carry Brian when he needed it. He and his mother recount story after story of people throughout his life who made sure he didn't miss out on anything, regardless of his physical limitations.

"Always, if there is anything I want to do, nice people make it happen to make sure I'm not limited by my wheelchair," says Brian. "There is nothing that I wanted to do that I couldn't." With his trademark wisdom



and insight, he adds thoughtfully, "Looking at my Christian faith and learning from the spiritual mentors in my life, I have realized that on our own we are weak, but when we ask, He is there to be our strength."

In the spirit of the God he loves, Brian focuses his effort on helping others, turning his weakness into someone else's strength. Feeling called to the ministry since his freshman year of college, he feels that God has allowed him to be in his wheelchair to minister to people who are suffering. Burdened by the fact that the disabled are the largest unchurched population, he has devoted his time to volunteering at Joni and Friends, a church training organization program for people with special needs, and has made it a pet project of his to educate churches on how to include people with special needs.

He has also volunteered at Cornerstone Ranch—a group home for people with disabilities whose goal is helping them live an abundant and active life—and created a Bible study program for them, and he's assisted with a special needs program at First Baptist Church in Irving.

In some ways, Brian's presence is a ministry of its own. He explains: "When I get out, it provides people with an opportunity to serve and it fights against prejudice in a way, by showing people what someone like me can do."

Brian's parents have always instilled in him the idea that he brings people joy by asking for help. As a result, Brian has become something of a collector of people. His relationships

are somehow deeper, and richer. "Brian makes relationships and really loves people well," his mom says.

"People come into my life and stay," he agrees.

On December 28, 2017, tragedy struck. Brian was having difficulty breathing, but that wasn't unusual. He'd often have to go to the ER to have his lungs suctioned, but usually he'd be given oxygen and a bag of saline and sent home. But, this time, it



Dr. Aaron Roberts, Brian and David Spann

was different. Brian stopped breathing and went into cardiac arrest on the way the hospital. After several weeks of being hospitalized, Brian was experiencing severe abdominal pain and a CT scan showed that something was wrong with his colon. Less than two hours later, he was in emergency surgery with a twisted colon.

The Spann's were overwhelmed by the kindness showed by the

surgeon, Dr. Aaron Roberts, who went out of his way to get to know Brian and the people who love him both before and after the surgery.

"This 37-year-old with a man bun walks in and says 'I'm a praying surgeon. I hope you're okay with that,'" Kathy recounts with a laugh. "I knew then, he was the perfect doctor for Brian."

Dr. Roberts removed part of Brian's colon, put in a feeding tube

and repaired a hole in his stomach. However, just as Dr. Roberts tied the final knot, stitching up his abdomen, Brian went into cardiac arrest on the operating table.

"We had to do chest compressions on him for twenty minutes," Dr. Roberts remembers. "And we got him back. It's a miracle that his abdomen was closed."

He explains that when someone codes, when their stomach is open, chest compression is difficult, which greatly decreases their chance of survival, particularly for someone with Duchenne's. "I was praying the whole time... please God, don't let this young man die on the table."

Afterwards, nurses who had heard about what happened in the OR came by to meet

Brian. No one had expected him to survive.

While the Spann's credit Dr. Roberts with saving Brian's life, Dr. Roberts is quick to deflect the credit. "I have to give all credit to God. It just wasn't his time yet."

There is clearly still work for Brian to do in this world. ❖

Deborah Dove is a freelance writer from Allen.