

Matters of the heart

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Seniors and twin brothers Daniel and Forrest Theiss are identical in more ways than just looks. Within three days of each other, both boys had aortic aneurisms causing them to undergo open heart surgery. The condition that led up to their aneurisms should have killed them long before their surgeries, but due to a “miracle,” both boys lived.

Before:

Before the surgeries, Daniel said he and his brother were “just like everybody [else].”

Growing up as twin brothers, Forrest said that they shared a strong brotherly bond despite sibling rivalries.

“When we were really little, we would fight a lot,” Forrest said. “There was a lot of tension, just between us. We’ve always had fun, especially with tricking people. We’d always try to switch spots, he would say he’s Forrest and I’m Dan.”

Going into their senior year, Daniel and Forrest moved to Mason from Long Island, New York. With Mason being such a big school, Forrest said that making friends was difficult.

“I thought [moving] would be fun, and we were pretty much like ‘whatever’ about the move; we’ll deal with it,” Forrest said.

“But, Mason is kind of a hard school to move to because it’s so big and there’s such a variety of people. So, it’s kind of hard to find your niche, especially being a senior when everybody’s already got their friends and stuff, but you know, we managed.”

Both boys had their futures mapped out, with Daniel planning on becoming

a medic in the Army, and Forrest already enlisted in the Marines, but by the beginning of February Daniel was beginning to experience the first signs that something was wrong.

“I was enlisting into the army, and I was at their processing center when one of the doctors there discovered that I had a slight heart murmur,” Daniel said. “I didn’t think much of it because... they said it was small. So, I came home from it feeling pretty good that I was going to get in, [but] then I [felt] sharp pains in my lower abdomen and lower back.”

After several doctors’ visits, both boys were told that they had connective tissue disorders in their hearts which would need to be operated on in June.

The Turning Point:

Three weeks later, on February 23, both boys went to school expecting a normal day. Minutes into first bell, Daniel said he was starting to feel similar pains that he had felt before. After going down to the nurse, he was rushed to Children’s Hospital where Forrest was expected to visit him later. Before going to visit his brother, Forrest began experiencing symptoms similar to that of a heart attack, and was brought to the same hospital where his brother was then receiving emergency care.

It was at that time that doctors discovered Forrest’s aortic tear, and while Daniel was still getting tests done, doctors in Cincinnati Hospital were trying to figure out how to save Forrest’s life, and heart.

When approaching this type of open heart surgery, there are generally three options doctors have: to save the current heart valve, replace it with a mechanical valve, or replace it with a pig valve.

According to the boy’s step-mom Kathy Theiss, the boy’s father, Matthew Theiss, decided that saving the boys’ valves was the best option, and made the life-changing decision to transport Forrest to the Cleveland Clinic, four hours away.

“[Matthew made this decision] because we wanted to save his valve,” Kathy said. “We didn’t want him to have a mechanical or pig valve because then he would be on blood thinners his whole life. ... My husband drove all the way to Cleveland, [and] was listening to the Bible. He had... [Forrest’s] heart literally in his hands, [and] he was freaking out, but he knew in his heart-of-hearts that [Forrest] would be okay once we got there.”

As Forrest was being transported to the Cleveland Clinic, his mortality rate was increasing five percent with each hour that passed. But, according to Matthew, when they arrived to the Cleveland hospital, he knew it was worth the risk.

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