



I wish my family were back together

I hope that there is a better future

(Written by Jaden during his interview with Big Brothers Big Sisters in February 2017)



“I had a feeling my parents were using,” recalls Jaden, a South Dakota Youth Hunting Adventure (SDYHA) Little at Big Brothers Big Sisters of the Black Hills. In the SDYHA program, Littles are matched with Bigs and experience lifelong enthusiasm and respect for the outdoors and hunting. They are taught hunter safety, ethics, and wildlife conservation. Jaden’s journey before entering the program was long and heartbreaking but one person would inevitably stand with him and help him reclaim his vision for a successful future.

Jaden’s parents, Francis and Andrea, had a crippling addiction to heroin and meth. They were also using alcohol, pills, and “anything they could get their hands on.” Admittedly, they were not the parents their children deserved and had left their children in a place of despair. Their addictions were deeply rooted and had a powerful, stifling grip on the entire family. Jaden recalls his living situation saying they did not have water, heat, or power. Eventually, they became homeless and lived with other people or motels in the area. Jaden, fueled by anger, could see the trajectory of his life crumbling right in front of him.

At one time in his childhood, Jaden wanted to become a Marine. However, as his family fell apart, so did his hope for a better life. Jaden was in 7th grade and could not see a future for himself. “I kept getting arrested for fighting...it was hard to see beyond that,” Jaden said. Surrounded by uncertainty and plagued with anger, Jaden’s explosive temper was leading him down a heavy, heartbreaking path. He needed nothing less than a miracle to help him see there was a life beyond the adversity that he was enduring.

Angry at his parents and their decisions, Jaden took matters into his own hands. He boldly took the box containing his parents’ drugs and paraphernalia to school with him and gave it to the school liaison officer. Jaden’s father quickly realized what had happened and went to the school to recover the box. The school liaison officer arrested Francis in the school hallway among the watchful eyes of Jaden’s peers. A Rapid City Police officer arrested Andrea at home.

Soon after their release from jail, they inevitably relapsed. Andrea, recalling the lack of support they desperately needed, said, "We didn't have Big Brothers Big Sisters, our Church, or a 12-step recovery program." Knowing his parents had relapsed, Jaden again turned his parents into the liaison officer at school. Losing almost everything to their addictions, Francis and Andrea were arrested one last time and lost custody of their children. To Jaden, this nearly sealed the fate of his future. However, something miraculous would soon happen to him. He would not remain in such a ruinous place in life.

While Andrea was in prison and Francis was living at the Cornerstone Mission Rescue and completing the Pennington County Drug Court Program to begin their slow process of recovery, Jaden and his siblings were placed in foster care. His foster family supported him in his academic success and encouraged him to participate in positive after school activities. After joining his friend on the fishing trip put on by SDYHA, Jaden and his foster family knew a mentor would be beneficial for him.

What Jaden and his foster family did not know was how John, Jaden's mentor, would help bring him out of such a ruinous place in life. John had a salient impact on Jaden's life and it began by spending consistent time together. The two went hunting, fishing, and worked at the Two Rivers Ranch together. Jaden says he never felt judged and always felt understood by John.

Jaden says they were "always giving each other crap," and during one of his most memorable moments, he knew he had someone in his corner standing with him. "My most memorable moment with John, was when I shot my first deer. I thought I missed it, but John kept telling me I got it." Jaden smiled from ear to ear while sharing a tremendous achievement. He described how proud his mentor seemed that day. "He kept looking at me with a big grin on his face and I kept looking at him with a grin on my face. It was a good day," recalls Jaden.

Jaden's mentor has provided a listening ear, an understanding heart, and an outside perspective. "John has been the first person to tell Jaden how he should handle issues as a young man. Jaden takes John's opinion to heart before anyone else. John gives great advice," said Francis. Jaden concurred, "When my dad would tell me the same thing, but I'd listen to John when he says it."

"Jaden saved our life and John saved his," Andrea candidly stated when she was asked about the impact of Jaden's mentor. Jaden is the exception to overcoming a life of adversity. All he wanted three years ago was for a better future and for his family to be together again. With great help, he is on the path to the life he deserves. This future Marine and his family are together again and growing stronger every day. They attribute their family's success to the help of a few organizations in our community, including Big Brothers Big Sisters and South Dakota Youth Hunting Adventures. With the help of our community, Jaden's potential has been defended, ignited, and empowered.

When asked what he'd tell his mentor, Jaden said, "I would tell him that he is pretty much like another father figure to me while my dad was getting stuff together in drug court and everything. I'd tell him there should be more people like him. He's a great and awesome man. He's easy to talk to. I would say I love him because I do."