

For the Love of Daniel

“If it were not for Daniel, I would not be the person I am today. And I like the person I am today,” says Adam. Twin brothers, one with Down Syndrome, the Sturdivants have an unshakable bond.

by *Rebecca Walden*

Photo by *Beau Gustafson*

For most college-bound 18-year-olds, the countdown to graduation is rife with excitement. Goodbye, structured schedules. Hello, sweet freedom!

And while Vestavia Hills High School senior Adam Sturdivant shares his classmates' enthusiasm for starting university life, he is also quietly reflecting on the one person he most wants to share his college experiences with, the one who won't be joining Adam at Auburn this fall—his twin brother, Daniel.

With an intensity seldom seen among siblings, Adam—older by a mere 30 seconds—has a deep and abiding affection for his brother.

“I've had people ask, ‘Is it hard living

with Daniel?’ and the answer is no, it is incredibly easy,” Adam says. “The fact that he has Down Syndrome obviously plays a part in [our relationship] because he's not going to have the intelligence to know, ‘I should be mad about this or that’ or whatever.

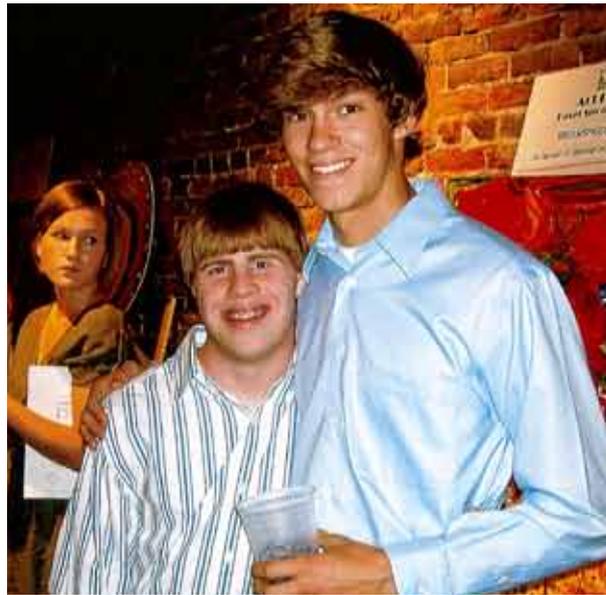
“Daniel makes me hold myself to a higher standard because he looks at me with such childlike eyes,” Adam says. “While that can be kind of sad because I know he'll never really know me for who I am, he knows me for who I should be. He never sees my screw-ups and my mistakes and the things that hold me back. He just sees me as this awesome big brother and I don't want to let him down; it pushes me to be a better person.”

The twins' bonding started early. When the Blizzard of '93 struck Birmingham, they were only four weeks old and already cozy bedfellows. “We had no power, so we put them in the bassinet together,” recalls their mother, Susan. “They were warmer than we were!”

And so began a lifelong pattern of close-knit comfort.

When Daniel began attending early intervention classes at The Bell Center, Adam tagged along. And later, at age three, when Daniel started early intervention preschool at Hall Kent Elementary, there were many days when Adam asked to forego his own typical preschool environment because he





enjoyed his brother's that much more.

This practice, notes their father Jim, turned out to be a real win-win. "Adam always went with him," Jim says. "He had to be schlepped along as Daniel went for treatment and therapy. Just as Adam fulfilled the role of a 'typical child,' which early intervention programs like, he needed to have other, 'non-typical' children be models for him."

Since the earliest, formative years, the boys have been each other's touchstones. "Adam was so mischievous," Susan says. "We used to put Daniel in his crib to get Adam to calm down and go to sleep!"

In kindergarten, never-meets-a-stranger Daniel was emboldened and excited, while

Adam clung to his brother, terrified. "Daniel gave him security," Susan says.

In time, it would be Adam who would learn to hone in on his own protective instincts. "We're not ashamed of our siblings," he says. "We don't walk around thinking that they are some crazy bomb going to go off in the supermarket that will cause us embarrassment. It is our family."

"I get irritated when I hear people say, 'Oh, you are retarded,'" Adam says. "I'm not offended by the word itself, but I am offended that they use it as an insult. Now you are saying that to have some uncomfortable disorder, it is a terrible thing. You are bashing my family and me. Don't go there."

When a slightly older Adam started asking when Daniel would get better and the realization took hold that it wasn't a "get better" situation, Adam studied his parents carefully and asked, "Well, what would happen if he had up syndrome?"

Adam still seems to cling to this child-

like notion, which is buoyed by his brother's naturally "up" disposition.

"Rather than Daniel being ignorant, his Downs Syndrome makes him so effervescent. He's got a sense of life that really no one else that I know has. You just can't make Daniel mad. Well, at least not unless you say 'Roll Tide.'"

This past fall, when the time came for Adam to declare his Eagle Scout project, honoring his relationship with his brother was at the top of his mind.

Motivated by a desire to create a social gathering spot for Daniel and his peers, while also improving a dilapidated portion of their school's campus, Adam set to work devising a plan to create a gazebo and outdoor area for the Life Skills class to enjoy.

After discussions with school administration and multiple meetings with the Greater Alabama Vulcan District Eagle Scout Board of Review, Adam received the green light for his project and fund raising commenced.

In a matter of four short weeks, enterprising young Adam had raised more than \$3,500 to fund the project.

What started with a personal essay in *The Vestavia Vedette*—Adam is the paper's editor-in-chief—about Adam's affection for his brother, led to a wave of support from other area families within the special needs community.

"I had people tell me, 'You are taking the words right out of my mouth' or 'I know how you feel.' Hopefully it gave people a little bit of insight into what our life is like together."

Word of Adam's Eagle Scout efforts spread quickly. The donations really began to pour in after Adam's then employer, Yogurt Mountain, sponsored a fund raising event, strongly supported by friends of both the boys.

"There were several people that came that didn't have a special needs connection but did have a scouting connection," Jim says. "They were former Eagle Scouts. They were supportive of the scouting program. A

lot of people at our church [Vestavia Hills United Methodist] were also very supportive.”

“Adam is very protective of his brother,” according to Yogurt Mountain founder, president and CEO David Kahn. “When he started telling us about his Eagle Scout project, we were happy to help. We printed up some fliers and gave a percentage of sales to the project.”

Word spread quickly, and before long, Adam found himself deeply humbled by an overwhelming show of support. “I got checks from people I did not even know.” With funding secured, it was time to break ground.

“We had been digging for weeks and pouring the concrete foundation,” Adam says. “When we first told Daniel about it, he gave a typical D reaction where he kind of says, ‘Okay.’ But as we explained more about how it was going to look, he got excited. When the concrete truck showed up and backed into the senior parking lot and he saw me on the back of this concrete buggy, he was like ‘Wow!’ That was when he realized we were doing something big.”

For Adam, it was important that Daniel play an active role in the build. “He came to the workday and helped,” Susan says. “Adam made sure he was holding things, and that he felt like he was using the tools rather than just watching.”

“When we started to put up the walls and the roof it was very evident that he was excited,” Adam says. “I was excited. I think we all were. After we had sealed the wood, painted it, done the shingling and roofing and built the benches, that’s when it really hit home [for Daniel] that this is for his class to use. When it was finished, we shared a really cool moment. I remember him saying, ‘Great job, Adam!’”

Although Adam is quick to downplay the gazebo’s dedication ceremony—“It wasn’t like a ‘Move that bus!’ moment” he says—this unusually thoughtful teen nevertheless made it magical.

Armed with a \$1,000 oversized check (thanks to smart stewardship of donated monies) that was cleverly disguised as a simple sign reading “Eagle Scout Project This Way,” Adam lined everyone up for a photo op. He then turned the sign around, revealing to Vestavia Hills High School Life Skills Teacher Jenise King that she finally had the

money to buy an iPad and many of the other classroom supplies on her wish list.

“When we gave the class the check, Daniel gave me a huge hug and it felt great.”

Of the gazebo space, King notes “It is much more than I thought it would be when Adam first described it to me. The other day, we’d made smoothies



Photo by Beau Gustafson



Photos provided by the Sturdivant family.

and we were able to enjoy them outside. We also recently had the power go out at school, and rather than be stuck in the pitch black of our classroom, we got to take our lunches to the gazebo area and enjoy a picnic. It is just a beautiful space.”

The area, which represents the combined Eagle Scout Projects of Adam and fellow scout Rusty Jessup, who performed site

prep and post-construction landscaping and aesthetic work, offers the Life Skills students a welcome respite from their class work. It has also created a space for life skills learning. In late spring, students will use their money skills to select and purchase plants for the freshly landscaped flower beds adjacent to the gazebo.

“Even though he’ll only get to use it for the next few years [as a student], in my mind, it will always be Daniel’s Gazebo.”

Soaking up every last opportunity to hang out together before Adam leaves for Auburn, the boys recently checked out of school to cheer on the Rebels in their run to the Class 6A Final Four. “Daniel is really into sports,” says King. “He had been going on and on about he wished he was going to the game. When Adam made plans to take him, Daniel was just beside himself. You can tell that they are proud of each other.”

“If it were not for Daniel, I would not be the person I am today. And I like the person I am today,” Adam says. •