

Chapter 8

Chivalry is Not Dead... Just Disabled

Our little town definitely felt like home to us by now. We'd grown very close to all the neighbors and were finally getting a grip on our financial situation. We still weren't sure how we could ever afford a home of our own, but then, out of the blue, an opportunity presented itself making it possible for us to do just that.

A young couple, Steve and LeAnna Morris moved into the area, and soon became our good friends. LeAnna's father owned some property adjacent to the farm, and just a "stone's throw" away from my parents. Steve and LeAnna built themselves a nice home there.

Shortly after they'd built their home, LeAnna's father heard of our struggles and our desire to someday build a home in the area, so he worked out a great deal with Lee on a half-acre parcel of land that he could purchase right next to Steve and LeAnna. We felt it was another answer to prayer. Lee went to the bank and got approved for a construction loan to build our first new house.

Getting our new home built was much easier for Lee now that I wasn't spending so much time away from home with the MDA. There were also other more important reasons why I needed to be there. Jason was about five years old by now, and he really needed my personal attention. Let me give you one example of what I'm talking about.

When we first built our home, the city engineer told us that because we were so far down the lane, we would need to put in a new fire hydrant... one closer to our house. That would have cost us thousands of dollars which we didn't have. We asked him to come out and physically inspect our home-site, hoping that there might be some way around it. Perhaps there would at least be a way to modify their plans so it wouldn't be such an expensive undertaking for us.

Well, the engineer came to our house, and at the time, we had just started the framing. We were standing by the foundation, and I could see little Jason down in the basement riding around on his "Big Wheels" tricycle he'd gotten for his birthday. Next thing I know, I hear this little voice saying, "Hey Mommy. I ride down the stairs... backwards!" That got my attention!

I turned around to see what he was doing, but before I could say a word, there he went, down the stairs... backwards! There were no walls on either side to keep him from falling off onto the concrete below. He just bounced down the stairs and landed at the bottom of the stairs with a crack!

He'd split the back of his head wide open, and I had to rush him in to the ER.

This wasn't the first time we'd taken him there. I think he inherited the same daredevil genes my brothers had when they were small. He would try to do just about anything that popped into his little brain, never once thinking about the consequences of his actions. I'm sure that my pediatrician, as well as the entire emergency room staff must have wondered what in the world we were doing to our little boy! It was so embarrassing. Let me tell you another one...

I was downstairs with Jeremy doing my daily cleaning, and Jason was upstairs with his little sister Jenny. She was about three at the time. I called upstairs and asked if they were all right. Jason yelled down that they were fine. I continued working. After a few minutes, I noticed that it seemed a little too quiet. I got the feeling that I'd better go upstairs and check on them myself.

"Is everything all right up there?" I yelled. There was no answer. I sent Jeremy upstairs to check on them. When he got upstairs, he yelled down to me, "Mom! I can't find 'em." I hurried upstairs, and to my horror, they were nowhere to be found. I checked the rooms again - nothing! Then I noticed that a window in my bedroom was open. This was on the second floor! My heart sank!

I ran over to the window and looked outside. I couldn't see either one of them. Then I heard some little voices coming from above me, on top of the roof! I ran downstairs, and out into the back yard.

I have no idea to this day how he did it, but Jason had managed to push the trampoline over against the house, then gone upstairs and taken Jenny out the window, across the porch roof, climbed onto the garage roof, and from there climbed up to the roof above the bedrooms. It was two stories up! There he was, standing on the edge of the roof, trying to talk Jenny into jumping down to the trampoline below.

My sister Marian had made him a Superman cape for his birthday, and he'd made one for Jenny out of a bath towel and a safety pin and was trying to convince her that they really could fly! I looked up and saw them, and just about died. I screamed, "No! No! Jason, just sit down. Jenny, just sit there - don't you jump!" By now, Jenny was crying, because she could see that I was so upset. But Jason didn't

seem concerned one bit!

I looked out into the field, and saw my dad working. I yelled to him and waved my arms to get his attention. He immediately came running over and saw what was happening. He got a ladder and leaned it up against the roof. He climbed up onto the lower roof and was climbing up onto the upper roof to get the kids when I heard Jason yell out, "*Hey Mom. I can fly!*" I watched in horror, as he jumped off of the roof, two stories up, landed on the trampoline, and then shot up like a rocket off the trampoline and over onto the grass.

It was a miracle he hadn't killed himself. The crazy thing about him was that he never seemed to worry about getting injured, and he never complained about any pain. All he wanted to do was have fun and share his fun with others.

I remember another time we went to visit Lester and Janice. We brought our kids along to see the house they were renting while they built their new home. Their boys were downstairs playing at the time.

When Jason came in, he ran right down stairs, and jumped off the second or third stair from the bottom, probably trying to impress the other boys. Apparently, it worked. Lester's boys started jumping down the stairs too... only they had to jump from one step higher. There's just something about boys and competition. But Jason wouldn't be outdone. He climbed up one stair higher and jumped from there! Heights didn't seem to bother him - after all, he did have the Superman cape!

Lester saw what they were doing, and said in his most authoritative voice, "Hey! You guys quit that. You'll break a leg or kill somebody. Now knock it off."

Those words had no sooner left his lips when Jason decided that this was his last chance for a "good flight, " so he jumped from the top of the stairs. I think he may have hit his head on the ceiling on the way down, but in any case, he landed wrong and broke his ankle. The crazy thing was that he just kept playing with the other kids, and we didn't learn until hours later that there was really a problem. We noticed his ankle swelling up, and that's when we took him in to the ER to be checked out. We were getting to be on a first name basis with the Emergency Room staff.

Not all his escapades were the dangerous life-threatening kind. Some were just weird!

One day he was upstairs playing by himself. I noticed that it was a bit too quiet. I called up to check on him, and he said he was just playing. I finished the dishes, and decided I'd better go upstairs and see what he'd been up to. I met him

in the hallway... "Hey, what's going on?" I asked. He smiled proudly and told me that he'd been "cleaning the bathroom." I went in to see.

I had inadvertently left my pair of sewing scissors out on my dresser in my room, and he had taken those scissors and gone into my bathroom and snipped the toothpaste into nice little sections. Then, he took the sections of toothpaste and smeared them all over my mirror, all over the shower doors, the floor, the toilet, the tub, and the walls and anywhere else he thought it looked good. Then he took a rag and smoothed it out as evenly as he could. It was the biggest mess I'd ever seen. Dry chalky toothpaste everywhere! I asked him where he'd gotten the scissors from, and he told me he found them in my bedroom.

My bedroom? My heart sank. I hurried to my bedroom, and I couldn't believe my eyes. He'd taken all my beaded necklaces and snipped them into little pieces. Then he took my new bathrobe that I'd received just two days earlier and cut the zipper right in half. Yeah, I laugh about it now, but at the time I couldn't see anything funny about it.

I believed that this was his way of trying to get more attention for himself. I knew then that we'd done the right thing in not taking on another two-year commitment as *national* poster child for the MDA.

Jason was definitely a free spirit. His little mind was going all the time, constantly thinking up new and exciting things to do. He certainly kept us from dying of boredom. With him around, we had to constantly be on our guard... sort of like tiptoeing through a mine-field.

This was at the time when waterbeds were the newest fad, and I wanted Lee to get one for us to see if it would help me be more comfortable and keep me warm during the winter months.

One day, Jason went into our bedroom, pulled down the covers and the sheets, and was playing with the waterbed bladder. He was apparently fascinated with the motion it created when he pushed on it. He played with it for a while, and then decided to see what would happen if he poked it with a ball point pen. That kind of makes sense... doesn't it?

He must have liked what he saw, because he proceeded to perforate the entire side of the bed with ball point pen holes. Then, he carefully put the sheets and covers back where they belonged and went back to his other activities.

We had no idea what he had done until late that night when Lee pulled back the covers and jumped into bed. He was only there a second, and then he came flying out of the bed, dripping wet, eyes as big as saucers!

"What the heck was that?" He yelled. I'm glad it was Lee that jumped in first, and not me.

Jason used his inventive little mind in positive ways as well. I'll never forget the day I walked into the laundry room to find both Jason and Jeremy sitting on top of the dryer with a blanket wrapped around Jeremy. The blanket was hanging over the open dryer door and secured in place with duct tape so Jeremy could get warm. Jason had stuck tape over the safety switch so the dryer would keep working with the door open. Jason was a very loving brother to Jeremy and was always thinking of ways to help his big brother out.

Jeremy was getting older and was about to enter junior high school. I remember the very first time we sent Jeremy off to school by himself as a little boy. I remember watching him walk down the lane, his frail little body waddling as he walked. I remember Lee saying goodbye to him, smiling as he went out the door, offering words of encouragement, trying to act all excited that he was a "big school boy" now. But as he walked away, I watched Lee start to cry. He remembered me telling him how hard it had been for me as a child, dealing with this same problem, the pain and the ridicule. Now he was sending his little boy out into the cold cruel world. Lee was worried that people would treat him rudely and be mean to him. That was one of the hardest struggles Lee ever had to face.

Elementary school had been pretty good to Jeremy however. He'd been able to make it through the first six grades pretty much without incident. Most kids knew him personally and being the MDA Poster Child for the state of Utah had made him somewhat of a celebrity.

The Muscular Dystrophy Association people were very good to us. They offered to supply Jeremy with a new wheelchair to help him get around better, since walking had become very difficult. They were a great help, and we were very appreciative.

We wondered if junior high school would be as kind to Jeremy as elementary school had been? We were very concerned. After all, the halls were much longer and classes were spread out. There were lots of heavy books to carry to classes, and Jeremy was going to be thrown in with a lot of kids who had no idea who he was or the problems he had to deal with. All we could do was hope for the best. I

prayed that his years at junior high would be kinder to him than mine had been to me.

We knew there were some pretty mean boys in this school too. One boy in particular had just moved here from California, and his reputation was quickly established. His name was Jon. He was a very troubled young man. His mother said they came to Riverton, hoping to get him away from the gang atmosphere and mentality he'd grown up around and gotten involved with in their last town. She hoped that a more country like environment would be helpful to him.

Jon took a liking to a little girl named Rachael, one of the cute little girls in school, but she wanted nothing to do with Jon. Her rejection made him angry. One day during a confrontation in the hallway, Jon grabbed Rachael by her arm and began to twist it behind her back. She was crying, and saying, "Don't break my arm, please, just let me go!" He wouldn't. The other students stood by and watched, fearful to say or do anything that might anger Jon. Jon was a tough little kid... a little gangster, a hoodlum or whatever you'd like to call him. Because of his reputation as a bully, the other kids were afraid to stand up to him.

Jeremy just happened to be in the vicinity in his wheelchair and saw what was going on. He knew that someone had to step in to help this little girl out. He understood perfectly, what it was like to be picked on, and he couldn't stand to see bullies take advantage of innocent helpless people. He thought he would be the best person to help Rachael, since he was in a wheelchair, and surely not even this little ruffian would hurt a kid in a wheelchair. He didn't know Jon very well.

He wheeled himself over to Rachael's side and said, "Hey! Leave her alone. You're a lot bigger than she is, and you have no right to hurt her. Please just leave her alone."

Well, Jon let her go, but immediately he and his two gangster friends turned on Jeremy. They walked over to him, began calling him names, told him to keep his mouth shut, mind his own business, and then said some other awful things to him. Then, without warning, Jon grabbed Jer's wheelchair and took off running down the hall with Jeremy hanging on for dear life. Suddenly Jon let go, sending Jeremy and his wheelchair crashing into the lockers. Jeremy was thrown out onto the floor.

Another student, who had been watching all this happen was standing next to his open locker when Jeremy was thrown onto the floor. Jon picked up Jeremy by one arm, dragged him over to the kid's locker and literally threw him up against the wall, and then stuffed him into the locker and slammed the door shut!

He then turned his attention back to Rachael and continued to torment her. He further intimidated the other kids by telling them that if any of them told on him, or let Jeremy out of the locker, that he'd get them as well.

I couldn't believe it! Where were the teachers when all this was happening? Why didn't any adults hear all the commotion that was going on and come to check on it. Where were the other kids that should have helped out? I was absolutely shocked that anyone could be that brutal and mean, especially to such a helpless victim!

Jeremy was so terrified, that he didn't dare yell for help. He just stood there in the locker, his legs trembling in pain, the cold metal walls encasing him for what he said seemed like an eternity. The kids went to their classes, leaving the halls empty. Apparently, no one in authority noticed his wheelchair lying on its side in the hallway.

Eventually, someone did tell a teacher what had happened. They got the Janitor to come and let Jeremy out of the locker. He was completely terrified and traumatized. I received a call from the office, asking me to come down to the school. I had never seen Jeremy so upset. I was angry, to the point that I could hardly control my emotions... emotions that I had never felt before.

I decided to go to Jon's house. I wanted to meet this boy's mother and ask her face to face, how she could allow her son to be this type of a person. To my surprise, his mom did not welcome me in. She just said, in a very snooty tone of voice, "Well, I'm sorry he did this to your kid, and if you can do something with him, fine. But I can't do anything with him. It's out of my hands. I can't do a thing with that kid." Her demeanor and attitude actually made me feel sorry for Jon. I sensed no love or concern for her son, only frustration and contempt.

Lee's sister and her husband were both in law enforcement at the time. They were so angry when they heard what had happened to Jeremy that they went to the school and asked the Principal for permission to talk to these boys and their parents. He said they could.

They arranged for the boys and their parents to be brought in together, and Jeremy's Aunt and Uncle, along with another policeman friend, came dressed in their uniforms, with guns and batons showing, to impress upon these boys that this type of behavior would not be tolerated. They assured them that if this type of thing ever happened again, that they had a special place prepared to take them where they would straighten them out.

Jeremy's aunt and uncle had a son, Neil, who was a few years older than Jeremy, and they brought him along. It was all he could do, not to beat the stuffing out of these bullies.

The meeting must have went well. When the boys left they were all crying, and they never bothered Jeremy again.

Jeremy, however, was afraid to return to school. Neil helped him return by being his "personal escort" for several days following Jeremy's return. He told Jeremy not to worry any more, that he would be his "muscles." He let all the other kids know that he was Jeremy's personal "body guard," and that if anyone messed with Jeremy, they would have to deal with him.

I couldn't believe that they didn't even expel these boys, especially Jon, after all he'd done. I asked the Principal why they hadn't expelled Jon, and his answer was that it wouldn't have done any good. "He wouldn't have learned any lessons from that," he told me.

I remember how horrifying that day was for Jeremy. It was appalling to me as a parent, to think that this type of behavior could occur in our schools. I felt frustrated that there wasn't anything I could do to guarantee that this type of thing wouldn't happen to him again.

In all my years at school I had received criticism and been the object of cruel remarks, but I had never been physically accosted or humiliated the way Jeremy was that day. I hurt so much for him, knowing how lonely and scared he must have felt as these boys beat him and then left him caged up in that locker. How could such a terrible thing happen to my son, a gentle little boy who would never ever dream of hurting or being unkind to anyone? I prayed that this kind of thing would never happen to him again. Nevertheless, I knew that every day held at least the possibility that it could. I think the events of that day took something away from my life that I've never recovered from, and marked the beginning of an era that lacks the compassionate innocence of life I used to know and love.