



Mr. Charles Grayson Gilbert

February 1, 1990 - April 6, 2023

Charles Grayson Gilbert, who was 5 years old when he was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer and became a miracle survivor and the subject of an acclaimed Baltimore Sun photograph, died Thursday in his sleep at his mother's home in the Woodbrook neighborhood of Baltimore County. He was 33.

"Grayson was one those people who didn't want to be known as a miracle child," said a brother, S.P. Wesley "Wes" Gilbert Jr. of Jarrettsville. "He tried to be normal and wanted to be like Clark Kent, but he really was Superman."

Mr. Gilbert's childhood friend Coleman Bass came from the days they spent playing sports together for the Towson Recreation Council and as 5th graders at Rodgers Forge Elementary School.

When Mr. Gilbert was an undergraduate at Towson University and Mr. Bass at Dickinson College, they established the Inspirational Medicine Foundation, a nonprofit, whose mission was connecting sick children with their heroes.

"Grayson wanted to focus on positivity, and even though life can be hard, it's how we respond to it that makes us who we are, and that's who he was," Mr. Bass said.

“He was always positive and ready to do things. That was the messaging he lived by,” he said. “And that’s where he found courage.”

Charles Grayson Gilbert was born in Baltimore and raised in Woodbrook. Known as Grayson, he was the son of Stephen Phillips Wesley Gilbert Sr., a commercial real estate broker who died in January, and Joan “Jodie” Foster Gilbert, a homemaker and Johns Hopkins Hospital volunteer.

Mr. Gilbert attended Valley Academy and graduated from Towson High School in 2008 and earned a bachelor’s degree in marketing from Towson University in 2013.

In 1995, when he was 5 years old, his behavior began to change. He locked his arms behind his back, squirmed when sitting and ate less. Concerned, his parents probed his stomach and discovered a bulge.

They took their son to Greater Baltimore Medical Center, where a pediatrician detected a mass in his abdomen and urged that they immediately take their son to Johns Hopkins Hospital.

A biopsy revealed that a deadly tumor was enveloping Mr. Gilbert’s pancreas and other organs.

The dire news was that it was malignant, and the official diagnosis was pancreatoblastoma, a rare form of cancer.

His chance of surviving was less than 2%. Most pancreatic patients only live three years after being diagnosed.

While the diagnosis was pretty scary and we were all on edge, Grayson never showed it, even though he knew how serious it was,” recalled Mr. Bass, a San

Francisco marketing consultant. “He remained positive because he was wired that way, always put his best foot forward and kept showing up.”

Before the Hopkins surgeons could perform a pul, or Whipple’s Procedure, a 9-hour surgery, oncologists had to shrink the tumor so they could operate without killing the boy.

“They worked up a chemotherapeutic cocktail and brought it down to size,” reported The Sun in 2011. “The boy went through radiation, bouts of infection, high fever. The Gilberts were living an uncertainty they’d never known.”

After the diagnosis, Mr. Gilbert and his family visited the “Christus Consolator” or “The Divine Healer,” the massive Italian marble statue with outstretched arms that has greeted the sick, troubled and worried at Hopkins Hospital since 1896, when it was donated by Baltimore merchant and philanthropist William Wallace Spence.

The Gilberts were comforted by the words etched into its pedestal: “Come unto me, all of ye that are weary and heavy laden and I will give you rest.”

Before his surgery, Mr. Gilbert, who was the first pediatric patient to have such an operation, asked his mother, “Mommy, before I go into surgery, can we make a note to Jesus?”

During the terrifyingly long surgery performed by Dr. Paul Colombani and Dr. Walter Pegolia, the Gilberts returned to the statue to pray.

Mr. Gilbert then spent a year at Hopkins in recovery, but even though he eventually became cancer-free, he was diagnosed with a liver disease when he was 12, diabetes at 15 and a spleen infection when he was 19.

“His system is so weak he must eat 10 meals a day, and most of those leave him doubled in pain as he digests,” The Sun reported in 2011. “He’s attached to an insulin pump, he takes 24 different meds and 120 pills to manage the disorders.”

“Any one of these conditions would have killed most people,” Dr. Norman M. Dy, Mr. Gilbert’s primary care physician told The Sun. “He isn’t what you’d call a rare person. The fact he’s alive is one for the textbooks.”

“He didn’t show pain even from the residual effects of chemotherapy. He never wore those feelings on his sleeve,” his brother said. “He always kept a positive attitude and had a smile on his face.”

Jed Kirschbaum, now a retired Sun photographer, was on a routine assignment for a 100th anniversary story on the statue when he spotted Mr. Gilbert, a frail looking boy wearing his orange Towson Rec Council baseball shirt and hatless, with his hairless head illuminated by a shaft of light falling downward from the top of the dome, gazing up at the statue of Jesus.

The picture he took that day was published on Mother’s Day in 1996 and became an instant sensation.

“Once in a while — maybe half a dozen times in your career — things come together, converge in a way that evokes something special,” Mr. Kirschbaum told The Sun in 2011.

Several months after the picture was taken, in wobbly handwriting he laid a note at the feet of the 10 1/2 feet, 6-ton statue: “Dear Jesus, this is Grayson. If you could, just heal the other kids please. Thank you very much.”

Despite his medical issues, Mr. Gilbert worked after college for Celebree Schools “as a jack-of-all trades,” his brother said, and then for several firms in marketing before landing a job in 2018 at ACS Branded Drinkware and Promotional Products in Baltimore in marketing and promotion.

Mr. Gilbert was a spokesperson for the Children’s Miracle Network, which helps raise money for Hopkins and cancer research.

His great baseball inspiration was Cal Ripken Jr., who he had idolized since he was a kid and had received an autograph picture from before his surgery.

Some months later he was sitting with Mr. Ripken in his Aberdeen office after filming a Children’s Network feature, where he grabbed a ball and suggested the two go play catch outside.

The Iron Man later autographed the ball and told Mr. Gilbert whenever he had a tough decision to make, he’d pick up a ball and toss it in the air.

In order to raise money, he had patients at the Johns Hopkins Children’s Center create original artwork for neckties which were sold as the Miracle Tie Collection by clothier Jos. A. Bank.

In 2015, Mr. Gilbert was presented with the Children’s Hope Medal of Honor by the World Health Foundation at his church, Grace United Methodist Church in Homeland.

Mr. Gilbert was also an avid collector of Marvel comics and his brother said his favorites were: “Spiderman, Batman and Superman.”

In addition to attending services at Grace Methodist Church, he went to Hunt Valley Presbyterian Church.

“He was a man of faith,” his brother said.

Visitation for Mr. Gilbert will be at 11:30 a.m. Tuesday followed by a 1 p.m. service at the Mitchell-Wiedefeld Funeral Home, Overbrook and York roads, in Rodgers Forge.

In addition to his mother and brother, Mr. Gilbert is survived by another brother, Harrison Brown Gilbert of Towson; several aunts and uncles; a nephew and a niece. An earlier marriage ended in divorce.

By Frederick N. Rasmussen

Baltimore Sun

Apr 09, 2023 at 1:01 pm

In lieu of flowers, please consider making a donation to the Children's Miracle Network or the Johns Hopkins Children's Center in Baltimore in memory of C. Grayson Gilbert

Previous Events

Visitation

APR 11. 11:30 AM - 1:00 PM (ET)

Mitchell - Wiedefeld Funeral Home, Inc.
6500 York Road
Baltimore, MD 21212
(410) 377-8300
general@mwfuneralhome.com

Funeral Service

APR 11. 1:00 PM (ET)

Mitchell - Wiedefeld Funeral Home, Inc.
6500 York Road
Baltimore, MD 21212
(410) 377-8300
general@mwfuneralhome.com

Interment

APR 11 (ET)

Dulaney Valley Memorial Gardens
200 E. Padonia Road
Timonium, MD 21093
<http://www.dulaneyvalley.com>

Tribute Wall

TG

“ *Grayson is so important for many reasons. In spite of many challenges, he was never less than gracious, generous, kind & optimistic. A gift & model for us all.* ”



Tim Gilbert - April 10, 2023 at 05:39 PM

DB

“ *Our hearts are broken by Grayson’s passing. He was a remarkable young man who was a gift to us all. He fought back, even as a child. He will be remembered for the Heart and Soul he demonstrated while battling health issues. We Love him. Praying for Jodie, Wes and Sara, and Harrison. We Love you all.* ”

Debi Black - April 07, 2023 at 09:26 AM