

ROANOKERS OF THE YEAR

2006

STORIES & PHOTOS BY PAUL CALHOUN

Astounding achievements, a welcome home, a final goodbye – how some Roanokers put their mark on 2006 and helped make the year memorable for the rest of us.

Ryan Shelor: A Final Goodbye To An Improbable Life

Ryan Shelor defied the odds all of his nearly 22 years. He was born three months premature, weighed only two pounds, seven ounces, and suffered from severe cerebral palsy. Yet he lived to go to the 21st birthday party he had always dreamed of – and along the way he had more memorable life events than most people experience if they live to be 100.

How many people get to hang out on the sidelines during the game with the cheerleaders from their high school and at Virginia Tech? How many people develop personal friendships with Tech Coach Frank Beamer and several Hokies who would go on to careers in the NFL? Shelor did all that, and more.

How many people have an entire church devoted to their 21st birthday party and have a motorcycle club show up to take them for a ride? How many people help launch an organization devoted to helping the families of children with special needs? And how many people have a standing-room-only funeral and a procession worthy of a head of state? Shelor did all that too.

People who knew Shelor invariably talk about how he never let his situation dampen his enthusiasm for life.

The website devoted to raising funds for his causes – www.RyanShelorFund.org – states it best: “Ryan never let the limitations of his body interfere with his spirit.”

The website also gives a lengthy list of life accomplishments: “Ryan graduated



Ryan Shelor. *His life, shortened by cerebral palsy, was nonetheless rich with passion and generosity toward others more fortunate.*

from Glenvar High School, participating in choir, band, cheerleading and office supervision. He was involved in Challenger Little league Baseball since its inception and introduced the Roanoke County School system to its first service dog, ‘Bo.’ Ryan’s need for a service animal was the inspiration of the Saint Francis of Assisi Service Dog foundation and he served as its poster child for many years.”

Shelor had a charisma about him that managed to reach out and speak to others despite the words that wouldn’t come and the limbs that wouldn’t function.

“It was interesting that a kid in his situation crossed all boundaries,” says Ryan’s father, Steve Shelor. “All types of people from all walks of life were attracted to him.”

“People are always telling us that when they were down and they thought about him and his situation it gave them a lift, made them see their situation differently.”

When a kid in a wheelchair manages to keep a smile on his face, it raises the bar for others. And Shelor always had a big, beaming smile on his face.

Part of Shelor’s attitude toward life and his impact on others was no doubt based in his parents’ attitudes toward life.

“I always credit the fact that his mother, Cindy, is a giver as well as a taker, says Ryan’s father. “And I’ve always felt that the only reason we are here is to have a positive effect on other peoples’ lives.”

Despite his challenges, Shelor followed those beliefs, from pushing to establish the charity that bears his

name to helping plan the details of his own funeral, including picking out the clothes he wanted to wear and asking that the family ride in the same limo he rode in on his 18th birthday.

“The thing about the fund that is most important is that it was created from his heart and not by his parents,” Steve Shelor says. “That was what he wanted to do, to help others with special needs.”

“With everyone else it was always about Ryan, but with Ryan it was always about everyone else.”

That giving attitude is something the family hopes to continue through Shelor’s charity. It’s also something that continues within the family: Steve and Cindy adopted Zachary, another child with cerebral palsy, even though they were at the time struggling with Ryan’s declining health.

“People say they don’t know if we’re nuts or if we’re saints,” Steve says, adding a smile and a laugh. “We’ve had so much experience, and we know how to take care of him, so it was the natural thing to do.”