

Faith keeps young parishioner strong in battle with brain cancer and Lyme disease



Faces of Faith

When Corey Dregier was a student at Archbishop Curley High School in Baltimore, one burning goal consumed his life: making it into one of the nation's top collegiate ice hockey programs.

"I had a 4.2 grade point average just so I could play at any college I wanted," remembered Dregier, now a 26-year-old parishioner of St. Francis de Sales in Abingdon. "All day, every day, that's what I was thinking about. That's what I was working toward."

A member of the varsity team from his freshman year, Dregier was in his skates for two one-and-a-half hour practice sessions every weekday. He travelled between Maryland and Delaware for summer training programs, skating six days a week.

"My best quality was my skating skills," Dregier said. "I went up and down the East Coast to learn from the best, and it was my favorite thing to do. Yes, I was small, but

it was pretty hard to catch me.”

Life knocked Dregier off the ice in a big way in 2008 when he was diagnosed with debilitating Lyme disease and a cancerous brain tumor. The brutal twin diagnoses came on top of an acromioclavicular joint tear in his shoulder after an opponent checked him hard into the boards that same summer.

The young man, who described himself as “100-percent athlete,” went from a life of kinetic energy to virtual immobility. The Lyme disease forced Dregier to stay on a hospital bed in his living room for nine months. It then took three years to go from a wheelchair to a walker and cane before he could walk on his own.

Dregier underwent surgery and extensive radiation treatments for his brain cancer. The ordeals weren’t enough to make him lose hope, however, and they renewed Dregier’s faith in ways he had not expected.

“The people who were there to help me - medically, emotionally and physically - were the reason I made it through,” Dregier said. “It’s surprising. The friends who I thought were the best weren’t, but other people came out of nowhere to help out.”

When Dregier could no longer attend regular classes at Archbishop Curley, his teachers provided him one-on-one instruction following the conclusion of his sophomore year. It took him three years longer than his classmates to earn his diploma, but Dregier did it.

GET TO KNOW

Corey Dregier

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What is your home parish?

St. Francis de Sales, Abingdon

Who had the most influence on the development of your faith?

George Alsfeld was a parishioner at St. Francis de Sales who had a lot of health issues at the same time I was in my worst spot. He would still come over and sit with me and we'd watch the Caps together. He was the most influential man I've ever met. Also, Friar Matt Foley helped me with my knowledge of the faith when I was at Archbishop Curley.

Who is your favorite saint and why?

St. Francis of Assisi. It's the Curley connection. The Franciscans serve there.

What makes you proud to be Catholic?

I'm proud to be Catholic because of the support that is continuously provided to me. I believe getting through life is a lot easier with teamwork, and there's a good amount of teammates who share my same beliefs.

Conventual Franciscan Father Matthew Foley, who taught Dregier religion at Archbishop Curley, said Dregier showed a tremendous work ethic, coming in for classes at times when it was a struggle to walk. The priest remembers visiting Dregier and his family and being struck that the young man asked questions about how his classmates and faculty members were doing.

“A lot of times illness can leave you with an inward focus,” Father Foley said. “Corey always had an outward focus. He’s more concerned about others than the pain he was experiencing. His heart is bigger than he is.”

Dregier had hoped that he could return to the ice after two and a half years of radiation. But, on the first day he started skating again, he took a hit to his head that effectively ended his hockey ambitions. The injury affected his brain, which led to even more ongoing doctor’s appointments.

“I guess it was God’s way of saying, ‘Dude, you’re not supposed to be doing this,’” said Dregier, an avid Washington Capitals fan whose bedroom is festooned with a full-wall painting of the NHL team’s logo.

Because his focus has been wrenched away from the hockey puck, Dregier said new opportunities have opened for him. During his recovery, he took up the drums and has been playing in his parish’s contemporary music group for three years.

“That’s what helped lead to my walking skills - being able to coordinate with my whole body,” he said. “The drums were pretty much my savior.”

Not long after taking up the drums, Dregier began dabbling in photography. He took classes and his work began to catch the eye of outside clients.

“I figured I could start a business,” Dregier said. That business, [Go Corey Go Photo](#), is now flourishing. Last year, he photographed 150 clients.

“I had to deny some requests because I don’t have time to do it all,” said Dregier, a graphic designer who is pursuing a degree in graphic design at Liberty University. “I’m thankful that God opened up this new path for me. I’m trying to see where it takes me.”

Dregier said he would not be alive without the constant backing of his family. His parish offered special prayer services for him, he said, and his Boy Scout troop also offered assistance. (For his Eagle Scout project, Dregier had arranged to record books on CDs for the Maryland School for the Blind.)

While there have been plenty moments of doubt and difficulties along the way, Dregier has maintained a positive outlook.

“Just don’t give up,” he said. “It’s not worth it.”

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