

# The Boy with the Golden Heart

*Juvenile Batten disease is a rare and terminal condition that causes blindness and seizures and is mentally and physically incapacitating with an average life expectancy of late teens or early twenties.*

If you never believed in fairy tales, this may change your mind. On June first, my daughter, Christiane, who suffers from Juvenile Batten disease graduated from Austin High School. Against all odds, she walked in her class processional and made her way across the stage to claim her diploma. It was a milestone we could have only dreamed of 13 years ago when we received her diagnosis. We never imagined that the happy day of her high school graduation would come and that our tears would be tears of overwhelming joy and gratitude.

When Christiane came home from school one day before graduation, she announced that she was going to the Senior Prom. She had already imagined her dress and reported that she only needed help narrowing down her choices for an escort. Christiane had always been self-determined and independently minded, so I flashed back to her sixth grade year on a similar afternoon when she came home from school and pulled a yellow sheet of paper from her backpack announcing that she would be trying out for cheerleader.

A thousand logistical questions raced through my mind as she confidently reeled off a rolodex of possible escorts ranging from childhood schoolmates and family friends, to a very complete list of every accomplished and handsome boy on the Austin High football team. After careful deliberation, she landed on Beau Beathard, a handsome two-time Westlake State Champion football player, Eagle Scout and a schoolmate she's known since she was a child. "Wow," I thought giggling to myself in amusement, "I better check it out with his mom." After all, why shoot for the stars when you can land on the moon!? I decided to float the idea past his mother first, in an effort to avoid overwhelming Beau or putting him on the spot. The next day I received this text that read, "Hi, Mrs. Benson, it's Beau Beathard. I would be



Christiane Benson and Beau Beathard attending Austin High Prom

honored to go to prom with Christiane! Just let me know when. So happy to do this and I can't wait. Thank y'all!"

I will never forget her broad smile and the complete delight that illuminated her face when I told her that Beau would be taking her to the dance. Every morning after that, the first thing she asked when I woke her up, was, "Is today Prom?" Christiane spent the next month imagining the perfect dress and spent countless hours imagining her first date. She very specifically wanted a dress that didn't touch the ground "so she wouldn't trip while she was dancing." Of course she was imagining that, too!

When the day finally came, Beau came to pick up Christiane and I watched from behind as he guided her to the car. He so intuitively held her flowers so she had a free hand to use her cane, plus he seamlessly offered his arm to guide her as they made slow but eventual progress down the sidewalk to the car.

There was absolutely not a single awkward moment or hesitation in initiation or leadership. With unflappable confidence, Beau spent the entire evening patiently and attentively attending to Christiane in every possible way with his fixed attention solely on her happiness. As I was a chaperone at the dance that night, I watched in tearful amazement at the incredible selflessness of The Boy with the Golden Heart.

Knowing that Christiane loves to dance and sitting face to face in two chairs, Beau sweetly took Christiane's hands and with absolutely no regard for how he may

appear, he began dancing with her while she sat in her chair. After the first song, Christiane leaned over to me and while handing me her cane, she said "Hold this mom, I'm going to the dance floor!" Determinedly, she inched herself forward to the edge of her seat and while using the table for support, she pulled herself out of her chair with unprecedented enthusiasm. He held her hand over her head and in spite of her vision loss and coordinated efforts, Beau steadied her as she twirled around exactly as she imagined she would.

For the grand finale, Christiane was surprised when Beau escorted her to the stage to receive a crown and title of "Prom Royalty."

The next day, I sent Beau a text to tell him that the evening had been the highlight of Christiane's life, what a special person he was and that I believed God had used him in a special way inspiring many by his example. He texted back and said, "I'm just really happy Christiane got to have a fun night. Thank y'all so much for letting me go to prom with her. I'm always around if you ever need anything at all, so please do not hesitate to text me. I would be beyond proud if I inspired one boy to do the right thing!" I am sure he did. I know he inspired me and I am humbled to know an angel among us who could show us all what fairy tales are really made of.

I never saw Christiane's smile leave her face that evening. Not once. I can confidently say it was the happiest occasion of her life and for an evening, she lived her own "happily ever after" in a beautiful story that only God could write. It was her very own fairytale that will forever be etched in her memory and The Boy with the Golden Heart will forever be etched in mine.

*Written by Charlotte Benson, Christiane's mother.*



# Who Is Most Blessed?



By Paige Alam

Ever offered a favor to someone, yet you knew intrinsically that what you received by being available to help them was one of the finest gifts imaginable? I had an opportunity to pick up two of my favorite newly graduated high schoolers from an overnight school-sponsored party. The pickup time was 4 a.m. and the parents were happy with me assisting, but I secretly knew I was the one who was being blessed. It's more than "it is better to give than to receive," it is the gift of knowing how much joy these two young people spread into the lives of others.

When I was in high school, I had a poster in my room that read, "Those who bring joy into the lives of others cannot keep it from themselves." That's how I feel about Morgen Ehlinger and Beau Beathard, which is why I am thankful they let me hear stories of their Project Graduation party and partake in some laughter along the way. They brought the sunshine to me and others, so I hope they receive unfathomable blessings.

There is another story, almost too tender to share, that involves this high school couple. Beau was invited to attend the Austin High School prom with a girl named Christiane Benson, and it was a friendship forged in childhood. Christiane has Batten's disease, a neurological disease that steals sight, causes seizures

**"One person gives freely, yet gains even more; another withholds unduly, but comes to poverty. A generous person will prosper; whoever refreshes others will be refreshed."**

PROVERBS 11:24-25

and shortens lives. Beau has a brother named Zach who also has special needs, so he understands the importance of Prom for Christiane and her parents. His dad, Patrick, said of Beau, "He loves Christiane from way back. It's the Zachy effect that my kids have gone through and they're very compassionate." Beau said "yes" to being Christiane's

date immediately. After the magical night, he also reported, "It was such a fun night. Happy I got to do it!" Morgen also chimed in and exclaimed, "It was so sweet!"

Young people are such a treasure to us, whether it's Christiane dreaming of her first Prom, the Benson and Beathard reunion, or the precious reaction from Beau and Morgen regarding the special night for Christiane. May we revere these outstanding young people, the compassion they have for one another, and the unfathomable, exciting and optimistic futures that wait for them.

Christiane's parents were completely overwhelmed by the gift Beau gave their daughter by accompanying her to Prom, yet Beau was beyond grateful for the opportunity to share the night with her. Who is the most blessed in any of these situations? It's impossible to say since everyone involved feels like they have been gifted. Perhaps this is how it feels when we give without reservation or expectation. Maybe this is the way our cup runs over with so much joy and love and contentment. These are often the moments that take our breaths away because of their stunning simplicity and unique generosity.

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