Life After Ryan

Jeanne White inherits the spotlight

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“I was always very shy.” Such a self-description has been Jeanne White’s hallmark for as long as she can remember. Jeanne stayed in the background even when her son, Ryan, became a symbol of the hatred and bigotry faced by people with AIDS. As Ryan stepped into the international spotlight, giving AIDS the face of a blond-haired, blue-eyed boy, Jeanne still managed to remain just outside the public eye.

Ryan’s death at age 18 forced Jeanne to take center stage. Three days after her son died in 1990, she was called upon to lobby Congress on behalf of a new AIDS bill. “I told them I don’t do things like that,” says Jeanne. “I don’t feel I’m smart enough. I felt like I would hurt things more than I would help things.”

Pushed forward by her son’s legacy, Jeanne went to Washington and spoke individually with 23 senators-though Jesse Helms refused to speak to her even after she cornered him in an elevator. “I just told what it was like,” she says. “We always look at the person who dies of AIDS and rightfully so-but I know what it’s like from the standpoint of a mother.”

Thanks in part to Jeanne’s efforts, the Ryan White CARE (Comprehensive AIDS Resource Emergency) Act, which has funneled billions of federal dollars into the war against AIDS, was signed by President Bush later that year.

Congress was just the first stop on Jeanne’s new path. "When Ryan died, I felt like it was the end of the world. I never really thought he would die; I thought I’d get a miracle. We were really strong Christians-I felt like I had been betrayed.

Religion has shaped much of Jeanne’s journey-for bette rand for worse. “The Christian community has held [action against and understanding of] this disease back,” Jeanne says. I worked with a Pentecostal who told me, ’You know, Ryan wouldn’t have AIDS if he went ot my church."

It was this type of attitude that drove Jeanne and her family from Kokomo, Indiana. Upon learning of Ryan’s HIV status through the small-town grapevine, the community labeled Jeanne an “unfit mother” and organized to keep Ryan from attending ninth grade. With Jeanne’s help, Ryan took the school board to court and eventually won the right to go to school.

Jeanne left Kokomo behind-she and her husband now live in Cicero, Indiana-and she doesn't go back: "I still feel uncomfortable there, because people still stare. There's still a lot of strong emotions there. They still feel what they did was right, and if they had it to do over again, they'd do it again."

Fortified by the adversity of her past, Jeanne's energies are now focused on the future. Determined to continue her son's battle, the painfully shy Jeanne now spends most of her time on the road, speaking across the country. Her first book, *Weeding Out the Tears*, will be published by Avon Books in time for Mother's Day. "It's not a tell-all," says Jeanne. "It's for mothers who've lost their child. It's about going on with your life after not really believing that you could."

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