

Remembering Ryan White 20 Years Later

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Two decades ago today, Ryan White—an Indiana teenager with hemophilia who contracted HIV from a tainted blood-clotting treatment—died at the age of 18, [The Indianapolis Star](#) reports. The most important AIDS legislation in the country, the Ryan White Comprehensive AIDS Resources Emergency (CARE) Act, was signed into law later that year and has since helped millions of low-income HIV-positive Americans afford treatment and support.

Following his 1984 AIDS diagnosis, White was barred from Western Middle School near Kokomo, Indiana. His story made national headlines, and his family's ensuing battle with the school system turned White into an unlikely AIDS activist and national celebrity. Some in his community reacted harshly to his now-public HIV status, taunting him and treating him like a pariah.

Ryan told his mother, Jeanne White Ginder, that he understood why people were treating him that way.

“He would say, ‘Mom, they are just trying to protect their own kids like you are trying to protect me,’” White Ginder told the *Star*.

White's case was unique because at that time HIV/AIDS was primarily associated with white gay men and intravenous drug users.

“There was a dissonance between what we knew about the disease and what people thought about the disease,” said former Indiana health commissioner Woodrow Myers, MD. “There was so much fear associated with AIDS, and people latched onto that. Ryan came along right at the time this was at its height.”

Myers added that Ryan “just put a face on the craziness.”

Ryan spoke to members of Congress, met then-President Ronald Reagan and traveled the globe to raise HIV/AIDS awareness and share his story, which has since been retold in books, on TV and in movies. Celebrity HIV/AIDS advocates such as Elton John, Elizabeth Taylor and Michael Jackson supported him and his message.

“He had a beautiful attitude and wanted to help others,” said Jill Waibel, one of White's close

friends. “We can all learn from that lesson.”

A replica of White’s bedroom is on display at The Children’s Museum of Indianapolis as part of its permanent exhibit [*The Power of Children: Making a Difference*](#).

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