

10-year-old has big heart and love for the outdoors

Written by Darci Tomky

There's no mistaking those big brown eyes and the smile that lights up 10-year-old Danny Vernon's face when he's out and about, either enjoying outdoor activities or interacting with his friends at school.

Born with cerebral palsy, this boy certainly has made a big impact on anyone who has been lucky enough to meet him.

"He's a very special boy with a big heart," said his mom Sharon.

That's just one of the reasons why Danny will be honored this month in the Living to Give Campaign. A blood drive in Danny's name will take place Saturday, July 31 from 8 a.m.-12 noon. Community members are encouraged to sign up for a blood draw time at the Flower Garden.

It's been a rough road for the Vernons

Life hasn't been easy for the Vernon family as Danny has had to face the effects of his cerebral palsy from a very young age.

Cerebral palsy is a neurological disorder that affects body movement and muscle coordination due to abnormalities in parts of the brain.

"It's been a rough road for him," said Sharon, noting he's had many surgeries.

Among these, Danny had surgery at age 2 for a hip dislocation.

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That same year, he started the vagus nerve stimulation treatment to help his seizure disorder. A battery was surgically implanted under his skin which directs short bursts of electrical energy to the brain via a large nerve in the neck.

Danny's dad Rod explained the treatment pretty much stopped the seizures. He still gets one every once in a while, but they are nothing like the seizures that occurred before the surgery.

In 2008, the battery was replaced, but the vagus nerve stimulation treatment is still a success for Danny.

Rod and Sharon said their son doesn't walk or talk, but over the years they have found ways to overcome that. Danny communicates with noises, facial expressions and motions. He finds ways to get his point across, they said.

Last year was an especially rough time for Danny, said Sharon.

Danny needed a spinal fusion because of his scoliosis, a sideways curvature of the spine. After a swallow test, he also had to have a gastric feeding tube put in.

On top of all that, the boy broke his femur bone while at a camp that same year.

Currently, Danny is struggling with inflammation from Crohn's disease.

Amidst all of these battles the 10-year-old faces, the Vernon family still keeps a good attitude about life, cherishing the time they can spend with Danny.

"He has a strong will to live," said Sharon.

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Camping, boating and swimming on this year's summer schedule

The Vernons are taking advantage of the warm weather this summer. Our goal is to do nothing but have fun on the weekends, they said.

"If Danny could only be one place, it would be outside," said Sharon. He's definitely an outside kid, agreed Rod.

The three do lots of camping, both in the mountains and at area lakes. And speaking of water, swimming is one of Danny's favorite things to do.

He also loves to take boat rides, especially if he can go really fast and over big waves. Even if his mother doesn't like those rough rides, Danny's parents still get a kick out of that delighted look on his face as the boat sails across the water.

Rod and Sharon are thinking that maybe some day Danny will get to go to places like the Grand Canyon and Mount Rushmore.

"I like him to experience as much life as he can," said Rod.

Danny absolutely loved going to Disneyland with Ginny's Kids, an organization that strives to create happy memories for families with children that are challenged with illnesses.

The Vernon family lives 15 miles north of Holyoke and enjoys being in rural Colorado, away

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from the big cities. Danny recently got a new pony he can ride with a special saddle.

In the past he's had the opportunity to participate in horse therapy at the YMCA Snow Mountain Ranch. Right now he's getting set up to go to Blue Skies Riding in Sterling.

Danny makes a big impact on others

Anyone who meets Danny will agree he is a very social boy. He loves to interact with other children, and his dad even said he's turning into a little flirt around all the young ladies.

Rod and Sharon are glad their son has had the opportunity to spend time with kids at Dragon's Wagon Preschool and then at Holyoke Elementary School.

Danny will be 11 next month and will start fourth grade.

Just like any other fourth grader, Danny loves to go to recess and see all of his friends at school.

Teachers have told his parents that his class is one of the most compassionate classes they've ever seen. "He has a positive impact on the kids, and they have one on him," said Sharon.

His classmates make sure they say hi to him both at school and when they see him around town.

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Danny goes to school as much as he can, which is about once a week. He and his mom are on the road a lot, attending therapy three times a week in addition to his once-a-week water therapy class.

Sharon is a full-time mom while Rod works for Omimex Resources.

They look forward to the many more adventures they will take with Danny this summer and as he starts school this fall.

A long term goal for the Vernons is to have Danny participate in stem cell research. It would be wonderful for Danny to be able to walk some day, said Sharon.