Episode 185: Travis had a son with asthma

There's a phrase that's very common in certain situations.

"Sorry for your loss"

We hear it at funerals, we see it in sympathy cards, we might even read it in an email or a text message.

It's kind of just the standard line that people say to those who are grieving after a close friend or a loved one passes away. It doesn't really take away any of the pain, but it lets them know that they're supported and loved.

But when it's a parent mourning the loss of a child, saying "sorry for your loss" seems terribly inadequate. The pain and the heartache is just too big. It's overwhelming. Suffocating. That commonly used phrase just falls way short, when the pain of the parent is so massive.

That's how Travis felt when his teenage son, Brandon, passed away after having an asthma attack.

We've had multiple episodes with a parent talking about the loss of a child, but Travis was the first one. This is a Flashback episode. And in the update conversation after the story, Travis told me that now they aren't completely convinced that it was asthma that took Brandon.

Scott
Did Brandon have asthma since birth?

Travis
Yeah, it was caught very, very earlier on in his childhood. Both he and his brother, Aaron, have it.

Scott
Okay. Aaron is his younger brother who is 16?

Travis
He's 14.

Scott
Oh, okay. So, Brandon is 16.

Travis
Correct.

Scott
Okay. For people who don't know, can you describe what asthma is? I count myself among that group - I've never experienced it and none of my family members have had it. What is asthma?

Travis
Actually, it's like shortness of breath - they do a good job on some of the commercials where they show, like, a fish out of the water and gasping for air - regardless of how much oxygen you're trying

to take into your lungs. Your bronchioles are all closed up. Therefore, you're not able to take quality breaths as you and I could. So, he has a rescue inhaler that he takes when he needs it.

Scott
What does an inhaler do?

Travis
It will open up the bronchioles to allow oxygen to get into your lungs and to breathe like you and I would.

Scott
So, someone with asthma needs to have an inhaler with them all the time?

Travis
Yeah, they both had it with them all the time - it was just a natural thing for them in this part of their life.

Scott
You just get used to it.

Travis
Sure.

Scott
Can you tell us a little bit about Brandon? Who was he as a person? Can you, kind of, just describe him?

Travis
He was a very caring young man. He loved to smile and was always happy. He loved hanging out with other kids. His mom had a daycare where kids would just flock down.

Scott
So, you get to interact with those kids a lot, then?

Travis
Right. As for hobbies, he loved to work with his hands - woodworking. He would help me work on cars, if need be - changing the oil and doing things like that. He didn't care about school so much.

Scott
But that's not really unusual, right?

Travis
No, it's not. I knew that he was more into hands-on than, maybe, schoolwork. He loved music. We just started going to concerts the last couple of years, and that was kind of our thing. Metallica was our last concert. So, we had a great time and a very memorable moment.

Scott
I think I saw a picture of you guys at that concert.

Travis
Right. So yeah, he loved to do all sorts of things. I mean, he did some bowling and baseball for a while. Then, after this came about, I learned more and more about him as a person at school and stuff like that. I learned that he was very well-liked by teachers and that he was never afraid to help out others. Hearing those stories gave me another perspective of who he was at school because when I asked him how school went, it's just, “Yeah, you know... just same old.” He doesn’t share that kind of information. I have to hear that from others. So, I learned even more about it myself afterward, which kind of sucked because that took this to learn that.

Scott
Did he ever talk about what were his hopes, dreams, and what he wanted to do after school?

Travis
The best way to describe Brandon was... when it came to being something, I always kind of joked about it with him, “Do you know how long that takes to do that? Let's say you want to be a doctor. You don't like going to school man. You got a lot of years of schooling there. There's no catalog of what you want to be in life that you get to pick from. Whatever you want to do, you have to put hard work into it, be passionate about it, and get through it.” He talked about various things. He was one of those guys where, one week, he wanted to do this and, next week, he wanted to do that - it varied. I mean, it could have been from a police officer for a while. He also said that he wanted to work with needy kids, which I was very impressed with for a kid at his age.

Scott
Yeah, to have a heart for helping other people.

Travis
Right. Which, kind of, goes hand-in-hand at the end of the story.

Scott
Let's talk about what happened on that day. He had an asthma attack. He had asthma attacks before.

Travis
Correct.

Scott
I guess we should set the scene here for the listeners as far as your family arrangement. I understand that you and Brandon's mother, Becky, have divorced.

Travis
Yeah.

Scott
Okay. So, Brandon and Aaron live with Becky and their stepfather, Chris.

Travis
Correct, yup.

Scott
Then, you married Wanda?

Travis
Correct.

Scott
So, this happened at their home. Who was there when it happened?

Travis
It was just Aaron.

Scott
So, there were just the 2 of them at home.

Travis
Yeah.

Scott
Okay. Can you just take us through what happened that day?

Travis
I guess, prior to it all taking place, things were fairly normal. They wanted to get something to eat. They picked something up at the restaurant that they chose to go to, brought it home, and had supper - nothing out of the ordinary. Then, Becky and her husband wanted to go run a quick errand - that was right around 7.30 - 8.00 o'clock, so to speak. After they left - they had been gone for, probably, about 10-15 minutes - Becky received a phone call from Aaron, saying that Brandon was having troubles. Naturally, she did whatever she could to get back to the house and called 911. I believe Aaron had also tried to call 911. I suppose he got disconnected from the commotion or whatever. Either way, 911 was being called from either one of them as it went down.

They're teenage boys. They were in their own room - they have separate rooms - and are usually on a gaming device, on headsets, and different things like that. So, when Brandon was having problems breathing, he yelled for air and said that he was having problems. I'm guessing it must have been something he hadn't experienced before because, normally, he would look for his inhaler and go and get it wherever he had it, but he yelled for Aaron. Amazingly, Aaron heard him. Aaron got his inhaler and gave it to him. He took his inhaler but it wasn't working. They have a nebulizer as well - which also has the same medication in a breathing machine - to get better quality medication into the system. By the time it was all set up, Brandon already knew that something was going on differently. At that point, he was struggling to take a breath and just pushed it away. That's when he collapsed and stopped breathing.

Scott
And Aaron was still the only person there with him...

Travis

Right. Yup. That's when Aaron called his mom. They called 911. Aaron started performing CPR on him as soon as he knew that he wasn't breathing and did so until the paramedics got there.

Scott
By the time they arrived, he was already unconscious.

Travis
Yeah. Aaron was kind of amazing through the whole thing. I've been in a similar situation years ago and I froze at that moment. Fortunately, I wasn't home alone and had other guidance. Over here, he kind of took over and knew what he had to do. Amazingly, he was never CPR-certified - his brother Brandon and his mom were. He had been at CPR courses before but he never took it. He was just there with them and observed what they were doing but never took it himself. So I guess that helped him out a lot - just observing what they were doing even though he wasn't certified. His mom and stepdad weren't very far away from where their house was, so they were able to get there just as the paramedics got there. His mom was hysterical, obviously. You hear things but you don't comprehend them until you see them. She was hysterical with Aaron. Aaron told her, like, "Mom, I got this" and continued doing what he needed to do. Paramedics got there shortly, took over, and then took them to the hospital.

Scott
Aaron sounds pretty amazing.

Travis
He is very amazing. I couldn't be more proud of him. I was very scared of how he would go through this whole process.

Scott
That's one of the questions I want to ask you later, so we'll definitely follow up on that. I've had the same conversation with some of the other people whom I've interviewed on the show, who've been through extremely unusual situations. Regardless of the training that you've had, you never know how you're going to react in an emergency situation until it actually happens. That's when you find out that, obviously, Aaron is one of those people who is able to react calmly and just do what needs to be done.

Travis
Yeah, As I said, I would have never expected a 14-year-old to do what he did. I mean - I'm just proud of him for doing what he did.

Scott
So, Brandon was taken to the hospital and...

Travis
Yeah, he was en route at that time. That's when I got the phone call from his mom. She was upset, obviously, and told me briefly that Brandon had an asthma attack and was taken by an ambulance at that point. I live about 40-minutes away from where they're at. So, I got in the car and jetted to the hospital that they were going to in Bismarck. Part of me was frustrated because I don't know the protocol of how they determine which hospital they go to. The hospital that they took him to does not have a pediatrics unit. When they got him there, they assessed him based on his history. In my

mind, they may have been wasting time, but I also understand that they're trying to eliminate the possibilities of what else could have taken place.

Scott
You mean they thought that this may have been something other than an asthma attack?

Travis
Well, they did come to us and tell us that he didn't overdose on something. Brandon doesn't have a history of doing anything like that. In my mind, I think they wanted to eliminate it instead of just going off of what we're saying because he had his inhaler and nebulizer there. They did check for other things - to me, some of that time was wasted on it. But I'm not a doctor - that's not my profession.

Scott
Yeah, they have protocols that they need to go through. The interesting thing too, though, is that they might have to go through this and they would have a parent saying, “No, of course! My kid doesn't do drugs.” But some parents don't know that their kids do.

Travis
Yeah, there's a conversation between Brandon's mom and Aaron while this was going on too, “Is there anything that he’s been doing?” Aaron’s like, “No, Mom. I would say something if that is the case.”

Scott
So he went to that first hospital and then...

Travis
Yeah. He was there for probably a couple of hours. As we all know, the airway is very important. By the time they got him hooked up to things there, they had to transport him to the next hospital. So, they needed time to arrange and go through whatever they needed to do to get that lined up.

Scott
The bureaucracy...

Travis
Yeah. So, then, they took him to the second hospital, which does have a pediatrics unit. We were able to go and see him in the emergency room at the first hospital. I did my damnedest to prepare for what I was going to see at this stage because I had been there before - taking him to the ER when he had problems with breathing due to asthma. Usually, when it happens, the nebulizer isn't helping much - you could just tell that he was struggling to breathe. A lot of times, he may have pneumonia or something like that too, because they also get that pretty quick. The steroids also helped to open up that airway and get rid of infection and stuff, too. He was just laying there and hooked up to a lot of machines. I tried preparing myself for that, but I can't. At that point, I was optimistic that we'll get this figured out. When they realized that he needed to be transported and took him over there to the second hospital, it took them quite a while to get him situated in his room and hooked up. Then, they did their own testing to, I suppose, gather their own information along with the other information that they had been given from the other hospitals as well too.

Scott
Probably, a lot of that was duplicated...

Travis
It could have been, yeah. The night seemed like forever. It was probably around 8.30 PM when we saw him at the first hospital. By the time we got to see him at the second hospital, it was super late - it was probably midnight by the time we got to see him there. We had family there. Both sides of our family are very involved with the kids - aunts, uncles, grandparents, and cousins. So, we did get to see him then. After he was pretty much stabilized and we were waiting on more tests, it was late night already. Pretty much everybody except the parents was still there - it was about three 3.30 AM on the 14th of June.

The nurse came out and said, “We just did some tests. He needs a pediatric neurologist.” I'm just like, “Okay, so what's the problem here?” I live in a town and we, kind of, have 2 cities - there's a river that separates us. Together, we have probably 100,000 - 120,000 people, so 2 hospitals are not small by any means. So, I was taken up, “Pediatric neurologist?! What's the problem?” She's like, “We don't have one.” I'm like, “So, now what?” She was like, “Well, we need to fly him out.” I knew this whole thing was serious, but getting to this level of seriousness is taking it to a whole different level. I never ever expected that I would have to fly my child somewhere to get the proper care. They told us that there wasn't a pediatric neurologist in the state of North Dakota. Then, we had somebody on Facebook who tried to correct us saying that there's one in Grand Forks. I don’t know if there's one but, clearly, it wasn’t the facility that need to see Brandon because they did a test at the second hospital and confirmed that he needed a pediatric neurologist - they communicated with an actual pediatric neurologist from Washington DC who looked over his tests on the computer, I guess, and verified that. So, that's what he needs. I thought to myself, “Are you kidding me right now? You have to speak with somebody in Washington, DC to figure out that he needs to go somewhere?” I was just mind-blown. When I think of kids being involved in car accidents, you wouldn't have a pediatric neurologist in case of a head injury. Are you telling me that every child has to be flown out? I learned so much about the lack of care for children in the area where we live. That's one of my other big things for parents who have kids - know what your facilities have and what they're capable of having. So yeah, I woke up Brandon's mom because she and her husband were staying in, like, a family room at the hospital. I woke her up and said, “Hey, they want to fly Brandon out. We need to decide where we want to take him.” We chose the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minnesota - they're pretty much the top hospital in the United States.

Scott
World-famous. Yeah.

Travis
I didn't understand how big and great they are because even though they're 450 miles away, I heard people go into Rochester all the time for this and that. So, to me, I didn't grasp how special the place was. I guess, when it comes down to it, I was very fortunate that it was an option for us because of the results that came out of this hospital. I wouldn't have wanted to go anywhere else. That was something I know I can go to sleep at night knowing that we did everything possible for him, and I know that that facility did everything possible for him as well.

Scott
So he went there that night? When did he fly?

Travis
Yeah. As I said, it was about 3.30 AM when I was told that he needed to fly out. I asked how fast can they get him out of here, and they told me that if everything goes right, he can be out of here in the next 3-4 hours, and that they would allow one parent to go with him. I had no problems with his mom going. If she was going, I would pack a bag quickly, try to get there as soon as possible, and try to be there when they got there or, at least, shortly afterward.

Scott
So you would just go to the airport and take the next flight?

Travis
Well, I actually drove. It's about a 7-hour drive from where we live. I had other arrangements. I had to drive in that direction anyway to where I live to get clothes and pack a bag. I got 2 dogs and was trying to arrange for somebody to take care of them because I knew it was going to be a while before I would be back. So, my wife and I got in the car and just started driving. I was probably 45-minutes away from Rochester when I got a phone call from his mom saying that there wasn't any room on the flight for her - they had too many doctors' equipment. His male flew their plane to Bismarck, so she was hysterical again, and I felt horrible.

Scott
Because you had already left and driven 6-7 hours... she could have come with you if you'd known that.

Travis
Right. Exactly. Yeah. I don't know if she would have been able to leave Brandon's sight either because we wanted somebody with him at all times - we don't want to leave him alone - so I would imagine somebody in the family would have probably stayed with him. She and her husband could have been leaving at the same time as we did too. So, other arrangements could have been made. I was crushed knowing that now I'm 45 minutes away and he had actually gotten to the airport at, like, 11.30 AM. So the 3-4 hour timeline didn't really go as planned. It's about a 2-hour flight with their plane from Bismarck to the Mayo Clinic. So, as I said, I actually beat him there by 45 minutes and was there when he got there. I mean, I was happy that I was there.

Scott
Right, you're still with him.

Travis
Yup. Even though nobody was with him on the flight - that was out of our hands. So yeah, we got to the Mayo Clinic and I was greeted by a doctor there. She was amazing. I was nervous as I could be because this severity was on a whole different level for parents to think, "Why am I here? Why is it this bad?"

Scott
And you've had no sleep all-night either, right?

Travis

I had actually been up since 5.30 AM, Thursday morning - that's the time I would get up for work. We got the phone call at 8.30 PM that evening, were at the hospital until the wee hours of early Friday morning, and then jetted. My adrenaline was running so much that sleeping was the last thing I could think about even though my body wanted to shut down.

Scott
Right, your brain was going 100 miles an hour.

Travis
Exactly. Yeah. So, we got there. As I said, the staff there was phenomenal. My first question, obviously, was, "Is he going to be okay?" They basically, kind of, told me that there's nothing that they see, as of now, that would indicate that he wouldn't be okay - just to remain optimistic - until they can gather information and get a better evaluation of what's really going on. At that point, I was still very hopeful and thought that this might be a long road to recovery or that things may be a little different, but we would still have Brandon. So, in my mind, Friday afternoon was when he got proper care.

Scott
When did Becky arrive?

Travis
I think they probably got there about 7.30 PM that evening. The whole time, I've been giving her updates as things have been going on throughout the day. In my eyes, things were actually looking good throughout the day - I was giving her good feedback. They were already starting to slowly wean him off of certain medications. So I was like, "Well, that's got to be positive." They were telling me, like, "It is good that we don't have to keep giving different things to stabilize him. He stabilized and we were able to take away certain things."

Scott
Was he conscious during this time? Could you talk to him?

Travis
Not at all. He never did come conscious this whole full time. We just stayed by his side and gave them updates. I was giving them great updates. I didn't ever want to give them false information to make it sound like it's going better than it is because I wouldn't want that either. I would just want to know the truth of what's going on. Honestly, I thought things were going in the right direction. Every once in a while, he would cough - they would tell me that that is a part of the brain's signs that he was still able to make those breathing motions. There are certain things they do look out for if there's a head injury or brain damage, so it was very comforting to know that there was still that hope and possibility of recovery. Whatever the recovery is, the end result was that we would have Brandon.

So, they got there and did a shift change at the hospital. We were, kind of, expecting that they were going to let him rest for a day or two before they would do anything drastic to him. So, we thought there would be, at the very least, like, a calm couple of days of letting his brain heal before they did anything, kind of, drastic to do any other further tests that would, maybe, put more stress on him. When they did a shift change - we weren't really prepared for the plan that they had - the doctor who came in said, "Well, right now, he's on medication to help prevent him from having seizures."

They believed that he may actually had 2 seizures along the way because of the lack of oxygen, so they said, “What we need to do is we need to take that medication away so that we can get a proper EEG rating. What that does is it measures the brainwaves - the activity that's going on in the brain. When we take it away, it should take about 6 hours for there to be any signs that he hasn't had the medication. So, there should be about a 6-hour window before we would even know anything.” So, they took the medication away from him. Then, like, 20 minutes later, he had a seizure. We took it very hard because we weren't prepared for what they're gonna do.

After having a conversation with the doctor later on that evening and asking him why they did what they did, I have a better feeling about it now. At that time, we were all very upset because we felt that they rushed into it. Later, the next evening, he did explain to us, “Nothing that we did harm Brandon. We needed to know what was going on with Brandon in order to treat him effectively. Without having that information, they couldn't have done the next step. Otherwise, we were pretty much just prolonging it. It wouldn't have mattered if it would have been the next day - the results prior were going to be the same as how it took place.” Later that evening, we had a pediatric neurologist come in - his bedside manner was horrible. I think he was just doing his job and doing it well. He didn't have that bedside manner on how to present something. Basically, he had the meeting with the family right there and just pretty much said that Brandon was brain dead.

I was going, “Are you kidding me right now?! When I got here earlier, we went from being optimistic. Now, you're gonna throw 'brain dead’ at us?!” We were all hysterical. I asked him, “How do you know that?” He went, “Well, they never know exactly how much brain damage there is until they do an MRI. Based on the different tests and the results that they got back other than the MRI at that point, I think that the other doctor doesn't know or didn't want to sugarcoat it.” However, when you talk to the next doctor, they're like, “We don't know until we do the MRI for sure.” So, our emotions were on this roller coaster from being optimistic to being ‘brain-dead’. The next doctor came in and said, “We don't know for sure until we do an MRI.” So, your hope goes up a little bit more. We were just exhausted from the ups and downs. I mean, I'm all for honesty but, in my opinion, the neurologist that came and talked to us could have come across a little bit differently.

Scott
Do you think that, maybe, he was trying to manage your expectations? If he, kind of, gave you the worst-case scenario and it turned out to be not that bad, maybe that would have been better?

Travis
Possibly. I don't know. However, at that point, our families were there in Bismarck - I think Becky's mom and dad were there as well. So, at that point, I was like, “Do I call my folks? Do I need to have them come here?” I asked him plain and simple, and he said, “Yeah, you do.” I couldn't make that call. So, he actually called my mom himself. Then, when I talked to her afterward, she said that I couldn't have been more cutthroat. I mean, even if you know the truth of what's going on, there's a way of explaining and revealing that to somebody in a little bit more of a compassionate way. I know bad news is never great to hear, but there's still a better way of dropping the bomb, so to speak. So, at that point, we had family come in - this would have been Friday evening when this all took place. They wanted to get him stabilized again in the next couple of days to do an MRI on that following Monday. So, that Saturday and Sunday were pretty much quiet. Nothing was really changing. Sometimes, he would get a fever or stuff like that, but everything was pretty much well managed. He was stable. So, we were basically just waiting this whole time for Monday to come so that they would do the MRI.

Aaron was there. I was trying to keep my life with him somewhat normal - taking time with him to just, kind of, getaway. They had, like, a lounge there where they had foosball and stuff like that. So, we'd break away in the evening and hang out there for a few hours just to try to have some normalcy and also help him to know that, “Hey, we're still here for you, too.” But it just seemed like he was in shock the whole time. He was always worried about everybody else. Like, “Dad, it’ll be okay. Mom, it's okay. It'll be fine.” He was very optimistic. He never had that breakdown moment until, probably, that Saturday when Aaron and I were in the lounge. We just, kind of, sat at a table and just started talking. I said, “How are you doing? It's okay to let it out. Cry or do whatever you got to do. If you're mad, it's okay. You can tell Dad. We all understand that this isn't easy and it's definitely not easy for you either.” It wasn't until then that I finally got him to break down on me. As a parent, you never want to see your child having to break down and being emotional. At that point, I was actually kind of happy that he was coming out, somewhat, in a weird way. I mean, as I said, you don't want to see your child crying or anything like that but, at that point, he needed to let some of this frustration out.

Scott
It was the healthy thing to do...

Travis
Yeah, exactly. Finally, he went, “Dad, I need to tell you something.” Usually, if Aaron's got something to say, he'll tell you and doesn't hold much back. That's just the way he is. So, when he started that whole line, I was like, “I better be prepared for what he's gonna tell me because, obviously, he's been hiding something.” He was like, “Before Brandon went down and stopped breathing, he told me that he loved me. Dad, I think he told me because he knew that he wasn't coming back.” So, I thought, “Holy cow... How have you been able to have the intelligence to pick up on that and to keep this in?” That showed me that he had seen something in Brandon. Then, he goes, “Dad, we can't tell mom. She can't handle it.” I said, “Okay, I won't tell mom until you're ready.” It wasn't until the MRI. They did the MRI on Brandon and they took us to a conference room with all these images up on the screen that they had there - it was just the parents, Becky, Chris, Wanda, myself. Aaron was not in there.

There was probably a staff of, like, 15 doctors and nurses who were in there. There was also a care team there. Believe it or not, the neurologist that Friday evening who didn't really have the bedside manner wasn't involved in any of this - I think we had made it aware that we weren't happy with how he, kind of, presented things. They showed the difference between a normal brain and Brandon's brain and showed that there was very little activity left. At that point, I had already, kind of, believed that was the result. I wanted it to be wrong, but my conversation with Aaron and a few things that the neurologist said that Friday evening, kind of, set in at that point. One of the doctors was doing different tests to test the depths of the brain before we went into the MRI meeting - I was at the bedside watching what he was doing. He was very good at explaining to me what he was doing without telling me the results. He was very honest with me as he was doing the different tests. Even though you're unconscious, if you put, like, a cotton swab towards the eye, the eye will still have a reflex regardless of where you're at, but there wasn't. They did a couple of other tests and he wasn't responding either. At that point, I looked at him and he said, “I'm sorry.” Then, I knew.

So, we went into the meeting and they revealed that was the case. So, we got down to the point of, “How do we tell Aaron?” We felt it was best to tell him with other family members who were there.

Some of the doctors had cleared out, so it wasn't so intimidating when he came into the conference room. I said, “Well, I think it's important that everybody knows exactly what he's gone through.” That is the point when I told everybody about his conversation with Brandon, so the care team also knew what he has inside of him and what he's been keeping in. Of course, he and his mom were there. I told her, “He didn't want you to know because he didn't want to put any more stress on you.” I didn't think there was a dry eye in the room when I told everybody that. When we brought him in and told them, and the staff there is something that they just are amazing. And a small example is

We didn't want Aaron to have the survivor's guilt of, “I could have done more. Why was it him? What did I do wrong?” They're like, “Had he not done what he did, Brandon wouldn't have made it to where he is today. We wouldn't have gotten the extra time with Brandon and Brandon probably wouldn't have been able to donate either. So, because of his acts, even though Brandon wanted to donate, he may not have that option if Aaron did not do what he did to get him to where he was at and be at the facility that he was at as well. So, that's how we presented it to him. He was upset, but he took it very well. As I said, I couldn't imagine being in his shoes doing what he had to do in that split second as a 14-years-old - I can probably say that I don't know if I would have been able to respond the same way as he did. So, that's what got us to that point.

Of course, we were asked if we wanted to donate. Brandon recently had a conversation with his mom. He had seen the donor part on her driver's license, so he asked what that was about. She explained to him, “If something were to happen to me, I give them the ‘okay’ for me to be a donor. They can donate my organs to other people.” Brandon's response to that was, “Why wouldn't everybody do that?” She explained to him that not everybody is comfortable with that and everybody's got different beliefs about that. He was like, “If I have my license, I'll be a donor.” So, I don't ever want to think that there was a bigger plan for him because I don't want to think that way, but it's hard to not think that there was a better and bigger plan for him in life. I couldn't be more proud of him because what he did in his lifetime is more than I could ever do for him. It's hard to be upset about that.

Scott
Does knowing that some good came of it help you get through this?

Travis
Absolutely. If I didn't think of those things - the possibility of hearing his heartbeat someday - it'd be easy to shut down.

Scott
What was he able to donate?

Travis
He donated his heart, which went to a 59-year-old male. Somebody said that his dad or grandfather was able to live a longer life and experience things that he possibly wouldn't have. The heart only got a 4-hour survival rate outside the body, so the process of lining up all the donors, having them set up, and making the arrangements for all of that to take place was crucial. Then, his liver went to a 10-year-old girl, which was the one that hit me the biggest. I have nothing against anybody that's older, including those my age - I've lived life - but a 10-year-old child hasn't had the opportunities that, maybe, a 59-year-old gentleman or me, myself had. So, it hit me hard when I saw the 10-year-

old girl had gotten his liver. Then, I believe a female had received his pancreas and a kidney - I don't remember her age. Also, there was another person who had received his other kidney. On top of that, he donated bone tissue and we thought that it was, like, a bone marrow type of thing. Actually, they can freeze the bone tissue for up to 5 years and he could help hundreds of people over that period of time - it's incredible. If a child has a cleft palate, they can use that to fix that. So, there are numerous things that they can do with the bone tissue. So, not only did he affect the four recipients of his organs, but the bone tissue will continue to do things for people for, at least, 5 years or however long until that's gone.

Scott
So, a lot of Brandon is still living on...

Travis
It is. He didn't officially on paper pass away until that Wednesday evening - I think it was 8:34 PM. Going through the donating part of this was a learning experience in itself for us as a group. When you watch TV, you would see somebody in a motorcycle accident or whatever, and they would take and say, “Well, this one person wanted to be a donor. We're going to donate this to this person over here across the hallway.” It doesn't work that way, especially for a juvenile. After they consider that you have no more brain activity, they do another test after 12 hours - the same test - to check the depths of the brain to confirm that there is no activity going on there. After that 12-hour period, an adult can declare, “Okay. They're officially cleared to donate.” With Brandon being a juvenile, there are actually 2 12-hour tests. So, you have to wait another 12 hours and a different doctor has to do it, so it gets dragged out for quite some time. Then, once those tests are done and confirmed, then they can start the process of finding donors. That process can take a little bit depending on what Brandon’s blood type is - his blood is O because I'm an O- whereas his mom is O+. With an O blood type, he's a universal donor to anybody. So, obviously, it was a much speedier process to find batches of people that needed it and to make arrangements to fly doctors or patients in.

They had a team of people there who were working with us and the recipients. Once they found everybody, we're given an 8-hour window of when they will take Brandon down to the operating room. Once we knew that we had 8 hours with him - it had been Friday evening around 8.00 - 8.30 o'clock - we said our final goodbyes to him and walked him to the elevator that takes him to the operating room - that was the last time we'd seen him. The staff in the facility itself - it didn't matter if it was a nurse, the valet driver downstairs - were amazing people. The best way I can explain to you is the hospital itself is magical. They definitely do a personality test with all their nurses and doctors for the most part. We were there with Brandon - he got there on a Friday - and, basically, said our goodbyes on a Friday when he went to the elevator. So, we were there for a week, but it felt like we were there for, like, a couple of months. In that short amount of time, doctors and nurses became like family. People and nurses that were on call came back that evening to say goodbye to us and to Brandon. Even though he was declared ‘passed away’, they were still giving them baths and talking to him. It just showed the compassion that they had in their jobs and treated him like he was still there.

Scott
I think being a person first and a medical professional second makes such a huge difference.

Travis

Yep. We asked them several times, “How do you do your job? How do you do this?” They said, “There are certain things that are hard, but we learned a lot from working with kids. We have also seen kids do amazing things where the outcome isn't always like this.” So, there are times when it's rewarding and keeps them going.

Scott 1
Well, they also know that part of what they do is making this experience not as bad as it could have been for you.

Travis
Right. That's what I said. I said, “Considering the outcome of this, you guys made this experience a whole lot easier. This whole thing - from asthma to donating and care in your town - has opened my eyes to a lot of different things. My biggest thing is letting people know and be aware of that. So, be aware. If you don't do your homework or ask the right questions about a particular disease or asthma, you're not gonna get the right answers. So, be more focused and aware of what you can do and educate yourself as best you can.

Scott
Be proactive.

Travis
Exactly. I don't want any other families to have to go through this. If it saves one person or one family from not having to go through this, then it's a success, to begin with.

Scott
Aaron has asthma as well. How has he, kind of, processed this after seeing what his brother with asthma went through? “Well, I have asthma too.” What does he think of this?

Travis
He doesn't talk about it. We've comforted him enough to know that we're doing everything that we possibly can to prevent this from happening to others. He knows that we're being proactive and all that.

Scott
You’re definitely better prepared now than you were before, right?

Travis
Right, which sucks as a parent, because you feel like you've already failed once - that's hard to live with. But with him, sometimes, he's a little bit more honest. I think he got to the point where he got used to it a lot. When he thought he was having a problem, it may have been more serious than what he led out to be. I think it's just how the person adapts, like, “This is my normal.” I don't know if he was having more problems than he was leading out to be - he didn't appear to be. Also, you build a tolerance - kind of, like, a pain tolerance. I would imagine that, after 16 years of doing this, his breathing tolerance was probably higher than what yours or mine would be - that might have been his new normal. It just got to a point where he would come to us and be like, “I've used my inhaler twice today, and this is not getting any better.” We talked to him about it and we're just, “Hey, if you think you're having any problems, you need to let us know so that we can be on it instantly.”

Scott
Are you hesitant to leave Aaron by himself now?

Travis
All the time. I could tell that he was getting annoyed by it because his mom said that she's like the helicopter parent and was like, “I feel, like, I can't go and do an errand now without thinking that something could happen to him at home by himself.” Then, we played the scenario, “What if Brandon would have been home by himself? It could have very well happened easily. We were just fortunate that he was not home by himself.” I saw him every other weekend. On Wednesdays, I have Aaron in the evening. It's damn hard to let them go. Everything was different when I dropped and picked him up at home - it was not Brandon and him. It's hard because this took place on a Thursday and I dropped him off on Wednesday night at their mom’s, and I told Brandon and Aaron that I'd see them on Friday.

Scott
Because it was your weekend.

Travis
It was Father's Day weekend too, so that won't be the same either. Things are definitely different. Each day, I act as if Brandon is still with us and may talk to him spiritually. I have a thing right now. When I went to visit him, obviously, the grass and stuff where he's buried were torn up, so I brought in some black dirt and grass seed and filled it all in to make it look nice. If it's not daily, every other day, I would take water up in jugs, put it in a watering can, and water his grass just to show that he's not forgotten. Just because he's not physically with us, doesn't mean he's not part of my daily life.

Scott
He always will be.

Travis
Yep. The other day, I cleaned out, like, his toothbrush. I didn't want him to think that throwing out his toothbrush was something easy to do. I felt horrible for doing it. And it's just things like that, that it feels like. I just don't want him to feel like I'm moving on.

Scott
That's part of getting through it. I've heard the phrase, “After a loved one has passed, something can happen and you can be ambushed by grief, like, even weeks or even months after that.” That sounds like one of those situations.

Travis
Yeah, it does. It sneaks up on you. It doesn't matter if it's a song that comes on the radio. Pictures have gotten a little better at certain songs - we had certain songs that we liked together. Then, certain things happen that you feel, like, “Is he there with you?” So, you try to take that all in as well. Well, he's big into Batman. Aaron and I were paying for something and I gave him a $10 bill and I got some cash back. Earlier in the day, I gave Aaron a couple of dollars to do something and he was, “Dad, did you just see what's on this dollar bill?” I said, “What's that?” He went, “Someone drew Batman as the face on the dollar. I think we should keep it.” So, we did. So, it's little things like that do pop up.

Scott
You never know when something like that is going to come up either.

Travis
Yeah, exactly. The other day at work, I was specifically taking a picture of something. One of his favorite movies is “Fast and Furious.” At where we live, there's a gentleman who had done his car like the green one in the very first Fast and Furious movie - it was one of Brandon's favorite cars. I went to take a picture of this particular thing and that car was going by the street, but I didn't even notice that when I took the picture. It wasn't until later that evening when I showed Wanda, that I went, “You got to be kidding me!” She was like, “What's that? There's that green car that's in the background.” There's, like, one in the whole town. So, certain things like that make me hold on to him. My biggest thing is that I haven't dreamed about him yet. I just want to know that he's okay. I heard other people who have dreamt about him and I’d get, kind of, upset because why am I not dreaming about him? That's my biggest thing - I just want to know if he's okay.

Scott
You've been seeing a psychologist to help you process through this - I think Aaron did as well. How has that helped?

Travis
Well, I had been seeing my psychologist and it happened to be the same one Brandon was seeing too. A lot of teenagers go through hell these days. I just wanted to know if he didn't feel comfortable talking to mom and dad - if he did, I wanted to make sure he could talk to somebody else about it and build a relationship. Amazingly, Brandon had been seeing him for, like, the last 3 years. I had been seeing him for that, so he actually became very connected with us.

Part of our routine every Wednesday is to go and see his psychologist as well. Aaron came to me and said, “Does Brandon still have his appointments?” I said, “Well, yeah. He got his appointments. But obviously, he's not going to be going to them.” He's like, “Do you think I can take over Brandon's appointments?” I said, “Absolutely.” So yeah. Right now, I'm hoping that they can build a relationship like what Brandon and he had. He already knew him, so it wasn't like Aaron was going to a complete stranger. It was easy because Aaron offered to go - I think it was because it was something that Brandon did that helped him as well. That's another one of those moments where I was just proud that he was willing to take that without me even having to suggest it. So, yeah, we've been doing that. Actually, he was just there this past Wednesday. I guess that he's doing well. I don't know how he does it. I even asked him, “How do you do it?” He's, like, wanting to ask me the same thing. It was just like, “I'm just proud of you. I just want you to know that if you do need to talk, don't hesitate. We're all going through a shitty thing right now.”

Scott
Aaron seems like he has the insight and maturity of a much older person.

Travis
He went from 14 to 40 years old - that's the best way we could explain it. I hope it doesn't rob him of the way he feels in his childhood.

Scott

That's got to be part of what helps you know that you got to keep going because you got to be there for him.

Travis
Absolutely, yup.

Travis
Absolutely, yup.

Scott
Thanks so much for your time. For several people, it's a sad and happy story because of what he was able to do.

Travis
Right. That's what I also hold on to.

Scott
Travis, I say this every time we do one of these flashback episodes, “Wow, I can't believe it's been five years already.” But Isn't it amazing? Time flies, doesn't it?

Travis
Time does fly. And it's amazing when you look back five years all that happened with life and the world and where we're at today. So, it's really remarkable.

Scott
I know you've had some things happen in the last five years. One of the things I wanted to ask you about is– you mentioned that you've had some other organ donors that have reached out to you because of this. Did I get that right?

Travis
Yep, absolutely. We've had the recipients reach out to us. They sent letters to LifeSource. That's the donation company or organization that organized all the donors with Brandon's organs and stuff like that. So, we've gotten letters from them and it stays anonymous in the meantime, but they can put their information. They'll send a letter to LifeSource, LifeSource will send it to us. And then whatever's in the letter, if they want to exchange information with us, they're more than welcome to, and then vice versa. We can also respond back to LifeSource saying, “Hey, we would really like a phone number or something.” We could call and talk to them or even, down the road, set up a visit or something like that.

Scott
These are people that were recipients of Brandon's organs?

Travis
Yes, yep.

Scott
That's amazing.

Travis
Yeah, we got a letter from the gentleman that received his heart. We had a letter from a 10 year old little girl that received his liver. She got a whole second chance at life. So that was probably the most rewarding. I mean, they're all rewarding but to see a young girl at 10 with so much energy and so much more to face in this world, it's just the bittersweet out of all this where it's tough some days to look at the good, but when you see a letter like that and you see a smile on a little girl's face and their family, it's pretty rewarding.

Scott
That would make Brandon happy, I'm sure.

Travis
Absolutely. They kept tendons and stuff like that too. And, we had a letter from a gentleman that had to have reconstructive knee surgery where part of it was from Brandon cause that stuff can last up to five years - all the tissue and stuff. So it's been kind of like the gift of five years for the whole process of it.

Scott
When we spoke, this had only happened about six weeks earlier. And since that time, Brandon would have graduated high school. How did you handle that?

Travis
It was very tough. We had reached out to his high school. We had requested to see if they would be willing to have an empty chair for him as if he would have been graduating with his class. The feedback from that wasn't very receiving, so to speak. In the school's eyes, in the district, they referred to it as they didn't want to have a memorial at the graduation, although we weren't looking for a big production. We just wanted a chair there and that's it.

Scott
That's kind of disappointing.

Travis
It is kind of disappointing. But instead, we have done a scholarship on his behalf, so his name is still out there. It's still within the school district. So we did the best we could just to keep his memory alive.

Scott
How have you dealt with, like, when the date of Brandon's passing comes up and holidays? That's got to be the most difficult time.

Travis
Yeah. They have gotten a little better. We still do kind of traditional things. We'll go to his favorite restaurant on his birthday. We still celebrate the day. Holidays are probably harder and, I'll be honest with you, holidays haven't been the same. I don't want to take it away from anybody, any of the other kids or the family members. It's a big part of life that's not with us, so it becomes challenging sometimes. I mean, I do have a good support system and everybody has been really good and we make the best of it. Some days, you have good days and some days you have bad days.

Scott
Especially with family. They know what you've gone through and continue to go through.

Travis
Yeah. And I have a history too when I had a brother and sister as infants. They were born with some complications. So I've lost a brother and a sister too. So I look back at my mom dealing with that too and then now she has a grandson that has passed. So, there are days I look at her and tough she is some days. Everybody kind of can relate in some way, unfortunately.

Scott
It's a good thing to have a family. That's the support that you need. Your younger son, Aaron, has since graduated as well, right?

Travis
Yeah, he graduated last year. I can't ask for more from him. He's got a good head on his shoulders. He doesn't quite know what he wants to do yet, so he's kind of finding that direction outside of that. Good kid, well-mannered, and has little issues with him. For what he's gone through and goes through each day too, I'm just blessed that he's done as well as he has.

Scott
Is his asthma pretty much under control?

Travis
Yes. And I got another kind of a twist of events with all this too that we later found out after I had the podcast with you. Aaron's asthma has done really well. We did more thorough allergy testing on him after this all went down because we later found out that it may not have been asthma playing a part in it. But after speaking with his ear, nose, and throat specialist here, we actually believe he had an allergic reaction to aspirin.

Scott
Wow. I don't think I've ever heard of that.

Travis
It is common with asthmatic patients. Also, if you do look into it, a lot of times, for children under 18, they don't recommend aspirin to begin with. It is highly possible that could have been it because when we stop and think about it, when Brandon started not being able to breathe, it was, like, almost instant. When they have an asthma attack, you get shortness of breath, you're getting little puffs of air, you're not getting those deep breaths, but it pretty much closed up instantly and the end result is that, probably, an EpiPen would have been the only thing that at that moment that could have turned the events around and it makes sense. Because in an email, one of the neurologists there made a suggestion that Brandon, in his condition, had to be without oxygen for approximately 15 or 20 minutes. Well, that didn't make sense to me. Honestly, I was very upset when you said that because I know Aaron was doing CPR on him almost instantly. So I knew that wasn't the case. But when we took that neurologist's information and put it together, about 15 minutes before this all took place, Brandon asked his mom for Excedrin or some Aspirin or whatever, she had Excedrin and gave it to him. So, we don't know the final answer unless we have done, like, an autopsy on it. At that time, we just notched it up as asthma. I mean, Hey, we just lost

our son here and now. What else could have happened? So that really wasn't the priority of it. And I didn't think an aspirin possibility would even be the case.

Scott
When we spoke last for the podcast five years ago, that means, recently, Brandon's 21st birthday happened.

Travis
Yep.

Scott
What happened on that day?

Travis
Well, I'll tell you what. I was kind of just kind of playing it on the down low kind of a day. I got done with work and after work, I was really going to go up to the cemetery and visit him. I ran home and did some things first, and then I went back and went up there to visit with them. A lot of times I take care of the grass and stuff around his headstone and different things like that and wipe it all down with granite spray and shine it all up.

Next thing I know, I hear a couple of voices and I'm going, “What the heck?” There are other people, of course, visiting up there at times. All of a sudden I see a couple of younger gentlemen walk up and they're walking closer to me and I don't know who they are. I said, “Can I help you?” And they're like, “Hey, it's our buddy, Brandon's birthday today. So we thought we'd come up here and have a beer with him. They were there to celebrate his 21st birthday by having a beer with him. Five years later, you don't know, like, friends and buddies of his, if he's still a thought to them or how much it plays a factor in their life. And I tell you what. I turned around and I gave each of them a hug. I was so proud that they remembered him five years later and I ended up sharing and having a beer with his buddies on his 21st birthday at the cemetery. So, not an expected event. I thought I would be there by myself, just kind of taking it in and, next thing, a couple of his classmates and friends showed up and we sat and visited and told stories.

Scott
That is just incredible.

Travis
Made me happy.

Scott
I would imagine. Yeah. Brandon lives on.

Travis
Absolutely. He does. And there isn't a day or event that I don't think of him and try picturing him being here and going through different lives - where would he be and things like that. So that never stops. Getting these letters from recipients and seeing them change their lives– you can't be more proud that those people get a second chance at life.

Scott

Travis is such a nice guy. I love talking to him. You can see an updated picture of Travis and family in the episode notes at WhatWasThatLike.com/186.

Brooke
Hi Scott, my name is Brooke. I'm in Oregon and I was just listening to your episode that featured this story, the update about Kasey and Henry - my cat's trying to say hi. I was just totally floored when she was telling her story about how she saw the Dead & Company this year. As she was saying that, and I'm sitting here at 2 AM Pacific time. In the background, ABC News Live is on - July 17th or something. As she was telling her story about the Grateful Dead tribute or the Dead and Company, the TV behind me, the anchors said, "Yes, the Grateful Dead, they're still touring." It was exactly at the same moment. And you don't hear Grateful Dead being talked about on the news, ever.

I grew up going to Grateful Dead concerts with my parents. I was the little naked baby running around in the midst of marshmallow fights, but I also am very tuned in with synchronicities and I feel that they're very important and they're things that you should pay attention to. Because I know Kasey also feels that way and there were so many of those pivotal in the relationship between her and Henry that I felt like she might want to know that there was another one happening in Oregon at 2 o'clock in the morning just because I was listening to your podcast with her updates and it's a beautiful thing and the world is beautiful. Thank you so much for having inspiring stories like hers on your show.

Scott
And now, I need to clear up a little misunderstanding. A listener identified as Kristin1714 recently left this review on Apple podcasts. It's a 5-star review, titled "Love this podcast". Kristin wrote:

I really enjoy listening to this podcast. The stories are interesting, and the addition of Meredith has been great. I appreciate listening to someone close to my age who doesn't have kids like myself, and is also a fellow introvert. I know that sounds nerdy to say, but it's true. I don't have Facebook any more, but if you create an Instagram account for this podcast, please announce it during one of your episodes. Thanks!

Well Kristin, I have good news. The podcast has had an Instagram account for years. The account is WWTL_podcast. Last time I checked, there were over 20k people following the podcast there. And actually, if you go to the podcast website at WhatWasThatLike.com, you'll see links to all of the socials there – Facebook, Instagram, Reddit, even TikTok.

Graphics for this episode were created by Bob Bretz. Full episode transcription was created by James Lai.

And now the Listener Story! I know you've been waiting for it! And to be honest, I love this part of each episode too. If you have a 5-10 minute story of something that happened to you, send it in. It doesn't have to be crazy like the stories we cover in the main part of the show – just something interesting. Record it on your phone and email it to me – Scott@WhatWasThatLike.com.

In this week's Listener Story, a shark encounter right here were I live, in the Tampa Bay area. Incidentally, Florida ranked #1 in the world for shark bites in 2023 – which is one reason you won't find me in the water here.

Stay safe, and I'll see you back here next week on Tuesday and Friday.

(Listener story)
I'm a scuba diver in the Tampa Bay area. Born and raised in Clearwater. I now live in St. Pete. Very familiar with the area. One day, my mom doesn't dive - dive meaning scuba dive. My father, brother, and I went down. This was about 20 miles out in the checkerboard area of Tampa Bay and it was about 80 feet deep.

On the first dive, everything went kosher. I mean, it was beautiful. You roll off the boat. You go down and you can't see anything around you. It's serene. It's beautiful. It's just peaceful. Then you see the bottom and there's so many fish around and you– I'm sorry for saying this, but you spear fish. I mean, that's what you do. You get snapper, grouper, and hogfish.

I'm terrified of sharks. My brother and father know that. Apparently, on this dive, they had seen a bull shark circling around. I was just, like, shooting up fishes. My brother and dad were around me. So we went up and we had to do our deco stop. A deco stop is you have to decompress at, like, around 20 feet - it depends on how deep you are. Anyways, you have to stop. So then we got up on the boat and went to our next dive and did the same thing - shooting up fishes.

I breathe heavier than my dad and my brother do. My brother nailed it. He got so many fish. He came over to my dad and I, and signaled "Hi" with his hand wave, thumbs up, like, "I'm going up." So we gave the okay sign where you put your two fingers together and three fingers up, "Okay." Then my dad and I both looked down and I saw– basically a side note is you start with 3,000 pounds - that's normal. But when you get to 500, that's like E on the gas tank, like a little bit before E on a gas tank, like you need to go up. I was at about 600 and my dad was about 1,000. So I was like, "He has so much more time." I was like, "Dad–" You can't really talk to each other underwater, so I was like, "I'm going to go up." He was like, "Okay."

So I was swimming up, just super duper happy. My brother's at his deco stop at 20 feet, and I was just like "Hi" because he turned around and he was like– I mean, you're in open water, and what I describe as open water is you can't see anything. It's just open water. There is not a thing you can see. There's nothing around you. He ended up turning around for whatever reason, thank God, and eyeballs got so big in his mask. I could see them and I was like, "Shit. He just did, like, a shark." The diver's term for shark is to put your hand up on your head. He did, like, shark and pointed and I just froze. I did the stupidest thing that you could do. I unleashed my stringer of all my fish. So the fish just started swimming around. Well, then that just got more blood in the water.

I just slowly turned around and saw this shark - I mean, eight feet, dorsal fin, fins down - and I was just thinking, "Okay, well, my little brother is taller than me, he's bigger than me, but he's younger than me. My little brother is about to see me die, basically." I mean, this thing was coming at me super duper fast. If I can describe the way that the ocean works, it's like a highway. Like, when you're at 5 feet, you're at 5 feet, when you're at 10 feet, you're at 10 feet, when you're at 20 feet, you're at 20 feet. This thing was at 25 feet, if you will, coming at me hot, super duper fast and I was just thinking, "Okay, I'm starting to swim up, trying to figure out how I'm going to push off of this thing."

Well, before I even could do anything, I felt a huge push on my chest. My brother had got to me before the shark did. He grabbed my BC, which is what you wear when you scuba dive. It's basically the vest. He grabbed the BC and just threw me on his back and had his spear gun out. The shark circled us a few times and then we went up. We did not do a deco stop which, by the way, for any divers, you should, but we didn't because there was a huge shark in the water. When I got up on the boat, my brother basically just pushed me up. My mom was on the boat because she doesn't dive. We were both okay. Then my dad came up and he was okay, of course, because they're fine and used to the sharks and stuff like that. But that was the most scariest thing that I've ever been through.

I literally thought I was going to die. To anybody who scuba dives, never release your stringer. They're not interested in your stringer. The other thing is I had my spear gun on me - considering I was shooting fish on all the dives. But my other recommendation would be if you are diving with a bunch of people, even if it's your father, brother, or friends, let people know that there is a shark in the area so that they can be aware so that they don't sneak up behind you because your life's important. If my brother was not there that day, I would not be here and I know that for a fact.