



*Quilt Me a
Pathway to Heaven...*

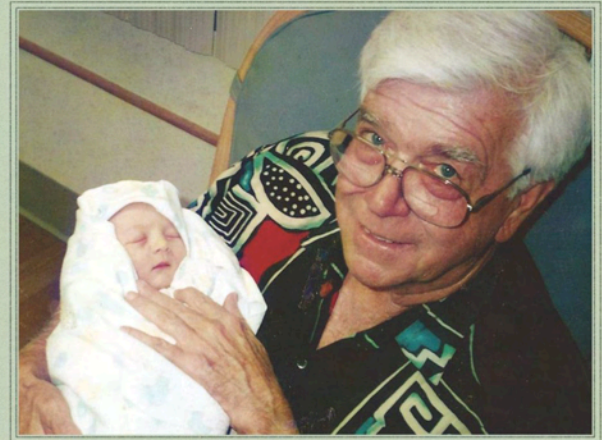
by Carol Willis

There once was an Angel
who walked among us, and
we are all better for it...

This is my story about James, a young
boy who left us early in life.



James was born on June 7th, 1994. In the words of his grandmother, “James came onto this earth like a shooting star”. His mother, Sue, described James as a “huge spirit”. She said, “As a child James cried the loudest, laughed the hardest, and would hug you so hard it hurt. He truly did everything in a big way.” I remember when I met Sue, the year was 1999. Our kids were attending Silver Strand Elementary on the beautiful Island of Coronado, California. My husband was in the Navy and we were stationed here for most of his Military career. Sue was an acquaintance at first. We mostly saw each other at school. She and I would chaperone field trips together. I would also see her at “Back to School Night” and other activities. We both had two children the same age. My son Jake was a classmate of James and my daughter Sarah was in her son Matt’s class. We had a lot in common.



Clockwise from left: James as Santa; James with Grandpa Jack, James riding his train; James with Dad and Great Grandpa Matt.

Sue is a good friend and a wonderful mother. She was active at the school and in the community, and she helped out with our annual fundraiser "the Spring Luau" every year. Her husband Jim was the Auctioneer. Everyone loved their family.

My memories of James were mostly within the school grounds where I would wait to pick up my kids. One day I was sitting in the quad area of the campus waiting for dismissal time, the bell rang, a classroom door burst open and out came James smiling his wonderful smile. After glancing at me for a moment, he said in a loud voice, "Well, it's Friday and I'm grounded, I can't do anything!" He then bolted off to the bus that was parked out front at the curb. James was always such a happy boy, even when he was grounded. At the school one day the kids were participating in a summer Olympic program. Jake and James were on the same team of tug of war. They pulled against a large group of kids and won. James was so proud. We watched as our children grew and finally found ourselves in Coronado Middle School.

One afternoon as I sat waiting for my son to return from 6th grade camp, the bus pulled up and everyone got off. It was quite a reunion of tired campers and anxious parents. Before we left for home, James ran up to Jake and said, "Oh Jake, we had sooo much fun!" I always thought of him as one of Gods Angels. I believe he had a mission in this life to teach us how to be more patient and understanding, and to love unconditionally. He was a true friend to everyone with a passion for life. I read a book once called "Angels Among Us", and I feel that James was just that. He was placed here in our lives to bring out all the true qualities we must possess to gain our entrance into Heaven. To help us quilt our pathways to Heaven...



Throughout his life, James was dealing with emotional and behavioral issues related to a birth abnormality that seemed to be getting worse as he grew older. His parents were always searching for the right help for James from doctors and psychiatrists. He started experiencing anger outbreaks. His mom told me he would describe his mood swings as “a tornado inside me”. He put many challenges before his parents and together they struggled to overcome them. They worked very hard to help James.

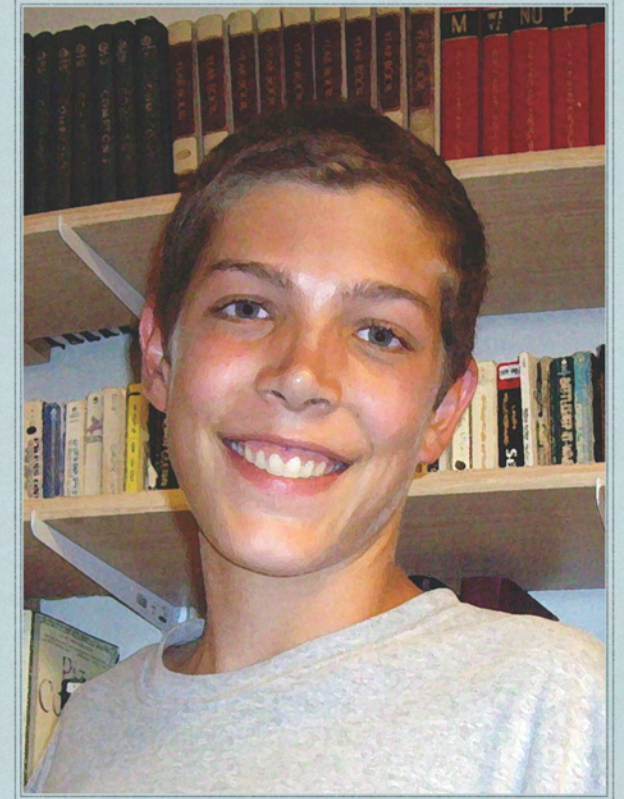
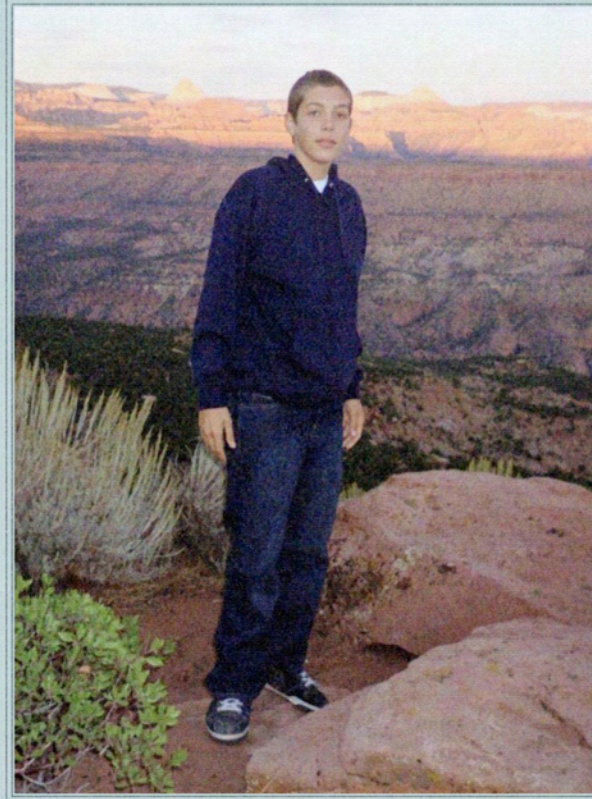
By the time James was 14 years old and ready to attend high school, his parents decided to send him to a therapeutic boarding school in Utah called Diamond Ranch Academy. This school could give James the opportunity to feel proud, positive, and truly happy. It would help James to target some of his problem areas and get a stronger grasp of himself. Although it was a very hard decision to make, Sue and Jim knew that they had to do it for James. Laying out a foundation for your children is like piecing together the squares of a quilt. The stitches must be strong enough to hold it together so that it will last a lifetime.



James with his father and mother at Diamond Ranch.

As the months passed, they watched as James transformed into a young man who smiled bigger and walked taller than ever before. Everyone was so proud of the man that James had become.





After a trip home for Christmas, where he was surrounded by all of his family, he returned to Diamond Ranch to prepare for his graduation in May. The week he returned to school in January he wrote a wonderful graduation speech showcasing his accomplishments and thanking everyone who had helped him complete his journey. Although he was not due to graduate until May, he felt compelled to write his speech early.

On Friday, January 9th I ran into Sue at the post office and we talked about James. She told me he was doing so well and how proud she was of him.



James surrounded by his family.

That same weekend I was driving home from the store with my daughter, Sarah, when she received a text message from her friend Kerri Ann. It simply said, "James passed away at school"... I couldn't believe it. My heart fell out of my chest. I couldn't breathe... "Oh my God, Sue!"

I drove home quickly and called Kerri Ann's mom; she told me it was true. We cried in shock. He had gone into the nurse at 5:30am with flu symptoms and by 4:30pm he had died.

That night my kids and I sat together, holding on to each other, crying for James and his family. It took me over four days to compose myself before going over to see the family. I found a beautiful picture frame with the Blessed Mother encircled with crystal stones that I purchased and wrapped for James' picture. What could I say to Sue and Jim for such a loss? Finally, one evening around 9pm, I couldn't take it anymore, and I drove over to their house and rang the doorbell. James' Grandpa Tom answered the door and introduced himself to me. The house was full of family and friends. When I saw Jim, I broke down and cried, completely at a loss for words. I stayed only long enough to offer my prayers and leave the gift.

I didn't sleep well that night. All I could think about was Sue and James. A mother to live on without her son and he without her.

How was I going to help Sue through this? All I wanted was to bring James home. I kept praying over and over “Please God let James come back to us”, “make this all be a big mistake”. I imagined in my mind that God would let James come up to his front door and walk in, running to the arms of his mother. “Please God, it hurts so much”...

One night I had a dream. It was James in Heaven. The beautiful light shown all around him, and he was walking down a path surrounded by all the archangels. They were singing really lovely with joy in their hearts. Flowing from James in colorful streamers were symbols of all the love that he acquired throughout his life. One streamer flowed longer than all the others. It was beautiful and sparkling. I knew it was the symbol of one persons love; but who? James suddenly looked over at me with tears of joy running down his cheeks and his big smile all aglow, he said, “Tell my brother that I know how much he loves me”... Then he walked off as if towards the gates of Heaven until he vanished.

I knew I had to put all my efforts into helping Sue and her family carry this cross that was put before them. The pain I felt as a mother was overwhelming. I just had to bring James back somehow.

A few day's later, I ran into Sue and her son Matt at a Mexican restaurant. We hugged each other and cried. Sue thanked me for the picture frame, and she told me she had it in a special place for everyone to see. I made up my mind that I wanted to make a quilt for her using James' clothing, and I asked her not to get rid of anything. She cried and thanked me for such a heartfelt gift. We promised to see each other soon and she left with Matt.

When I came home that night I knew I needed to get this done for them as soon as possible. The next day I sat outside on the patio with paper and pen and started to plan the quilt. A small bell hanging on the wall started to ring. There was no wind and I had never heard it ring before. I imagined it was James. He was so happy I was making a quilt that he could hug his family through and they could hug him. I cried and continued. The bell mysteriously rang several more times as I drew my diagram for each square.

After a few days and many tears, Sue went through James' t-shirts and found enough to make the quilt. Sue brought them to me in a big plastic bag. I thanked her and she stayed for a while. Before she left, I gave her my promise that James is ok and in Gods loving hands. I could feel a presence from that day on... Was it James? That presence helped me throughout the making of the quilt. From the moment I lifted each shirt out of the bag I thought of the memories that each logo represented, all the moments Sue had with her James. The concerts, games, his beloved money shirt, eating at In-n-Out, his magnificent angel that he drew of himself only a week before his passing, all the wonderful gifts that he received at Diamond Ranch, all of the things that brought such smiles to James' life, and all the precious moments that She would hold in her heart forever. I cried as I split the shirts down for cutting.

My daughter Sarah helped me set up the work station where she cut all the squares for me with a rotary cutter. My quality time with my daughter meant so much. We were bonding in deep sorrow for James, Matt, Sue and Jim.



A Keepsake Quilt for James' family.

Over the next several days I worked very hard... cutting, planning and arranging each piece. I placed James' picture in a frame just like the one I had given Jim and Sue with the Blessed Mother guarding over him. I pretended to talk to James all the while, and he kept smiling back at me.

I arranged all the t-shirt squares onto some jean fabric that I had from a previous project. Sue came by to observe the quilt making in progress and was brought to tears the first time she saw it. Sue said, "It's James, he lived in those t-shirts. Every week I would wash them and fold them and put them in his drawers. Some I would have to wash twice a week, he loved them so much." She said it was perfect.

I knew this was really going to be a special gift and I gave it my full attention. Since I needed a lot more material and backing to complete the quilt, I decided to go shopping. With limited funds, I took off to the fabric store. My intention was to make this quilt a gift to Sue, so I didn't want to ask for anything. I wanted this to be a "labor of love."

The fabric store had the exact jean material I needed at \$15.99 per yard. I needed several yards. I was also looking for the right backing material. I was mysteriously led to a bolt of fabric. It had the Padres logo on it. Could James like the Padres? Well, I decided it was James wish to have that for the backing, so I carried it to the counter. As I stood in line at the register, I started adding up the cost of all the material and knew I only had enough money for half of it. I had a few credit cards, close to their limits, and I thought maybe I could put a little on each. Then it happened... a woman walked into the store, came up to me, and handed me two coupons, one worth 40% off and the other 50%off. This was too good to be true. I needed two coupons for two cuts of material. She then said to me, "I just thought you could use this", and then she left the store. This was truly an angels work!



When I got to my car I broke down and cried. I knew the angels were helping me to make this wonderful gift. This was truly a magical quilt in the making. I often wondered why God chose me to be here for Sue. We were friends, but she probably had many closer friends than I was, and I didn't really know James as well as others may have. I think by having more of an outsider involved in being the messenger, it just helped them to see that God really does exist, and all of these miracles really did happen. You see, God just wants you to believe. He already knows that I truly believe. And James knows that I can convince you. You just have to believe...

Each day I called Sue and told her of the miracles I experienced while making the quilt. We would cry each time and feel a little of the sorrow lifted from our hearts and the peace that it gave us to know that God was truly holding James now.

Sue decided to bring me many of the letters that she received from James so that I could feel closer to him. One item in particular took me by surprise, it was the picture that James drew of himself as an angel. After crying over it, I knew it had to be on my quilt. She gave me a copy, and I took it to a graphic t-shirt company and had them place it on a t-shirt for me. I had a particular color of blue in mind for his angel, but when the finished product was presented to me, it was purple. Purple was always the color of the priests' cloak worn for someone's passing. Maybe there was some magic in this. I decided to accept it, and when I got home I found it matched the quilt much better than the blue I had originally selected. Sue also told me that James loved going to Padres games. Not necessarily for the game but for the food! The Padre backing material was going to be perfect too.



*My Dear Family
My heart aches with sadness,
Secret tears still flow,
what it meant to lose
all of you,
no one will ever know...
Wrap my quilt around
you, say a prayer and
God will ease our pain.
Love Forever
James.*

A message from James to his family.

Many days passed and I continued my work on the quilt. I could feel James' presence the whole time, as if he was standing right next to me. I remember something that Sue had written in James' memorial website that always got my spirits up. She said, "James and I had a special bond. James was convinced that I could read his mind. He would ask me 'Mom, what am I thinking?' and I would say, 'You are thinking about pie,' and I was right."

Since James' passing, my kids find time to hug me and tell me they love me everyday. We make sure that no matter what our parting words to each other, they are always said with sincere love.

As I watched the quilt materialize before my eyes, I imagined the great feeling in my heart to finally bring James home. All that was left now was to tie the quilt. My mom sent me a letter with a message from God to Sue and her family. A poem written by an unknown author. I changed some words to fit James family.

Gods Child...

"I'll lend you for a little while, a child of mine," God said, "For you to love the while he lives, and mourn for when he's dead. It may be six or seven years, fourteen or twenty three. But will you, til I call him back, take care of him for me?"

He'll bring his charms to gladden you, and should his stay be brief; you'll have his lovely memories as a solace for your grief.

I cannot promise he will stay, since all from earth return; but there are lessons taught below I want this child to learn.

I've looked the whole world over in my search for a family true, and from my most loving followers I have chosen you.

Now, will you give him all your love? Not think the labor vain? Nor hate me when I come to take my precious child back again?"

In a whisper, God heard them say, "Dear Lord, Thy will be done; for all the joys our James will bring, the risk of grief we'll run. We will shelter him with tenderness, we'll love him through and through, and for the happiness we've known, remain forever grateful to you."

Now should Thy angel call for him, much sooner than we've planned, we'll brave the bitter grief that comes and try to understand...

At the end of the letter, she enclosed instructions for me to tie the quilt. I had told her of the idea I had to tie the quilt with crosses instead of just a plain knot. On a piece of fabric my mother tied a sample of a cross... It was perfect. As I tied each cross I cried, as if pulling the pain from Sue's heart, one stitch at a time...

It was midnight now, and I continued my work on the quilt. My husband had fallen asleep on the couch and my kids were asleep in their beds. I could feel James' arms around me now. And for one moment, I thought I saw someone looking around the corner hidden behind a silk plant. It was James in a purple shirt from Diamond Ranch. I couldn't quite see his face, but I knew it was him. His image disappeared and I got up and said "James, is that you?" I cried as I walked around the house and saw everyone still fast asleep.

At an early age James asked his mother if she would be ok without him? Was he preparing her for his passing? He seemed to have an ability to relate to children younger than he was. Sue and I both had dreams that James was working with children in Heaven. Was he preparing for this in life? Several years before James had said to his mom, "we need to go to church". Sue searched for a church for her family and found Eastlake Church. Was James making sure his family got closer to God before he left them? When James drew a picture of himself as an Angel, was it his way of breaking the news to his family?

I called Sue one Friday when the quilt was almost completed. I felt that her family was in need of something from James to help them make it through the weekend. I offered to have Sue take the quilt home for a few days so they could wrap it around them for some hugs from James. Sue stopped by and wrapped the unfinished quilt around her and cried.

The entire time I worked on the quilt I could feel James' presence. When the day came for Sue to take the quilt home, I noticed that his presence was no longer with me. I felt so happy to know that he was home again with his family, but I missed him.

I believe that God had a plan for James. He put the idea into Sue and Jim's heart to send James to Diamond Ranch and through Diamond Ranch God condensed a lifetime of experiences and lessons into the few short months that James had left in his life. Lessons that James would have otherwise missed out on.

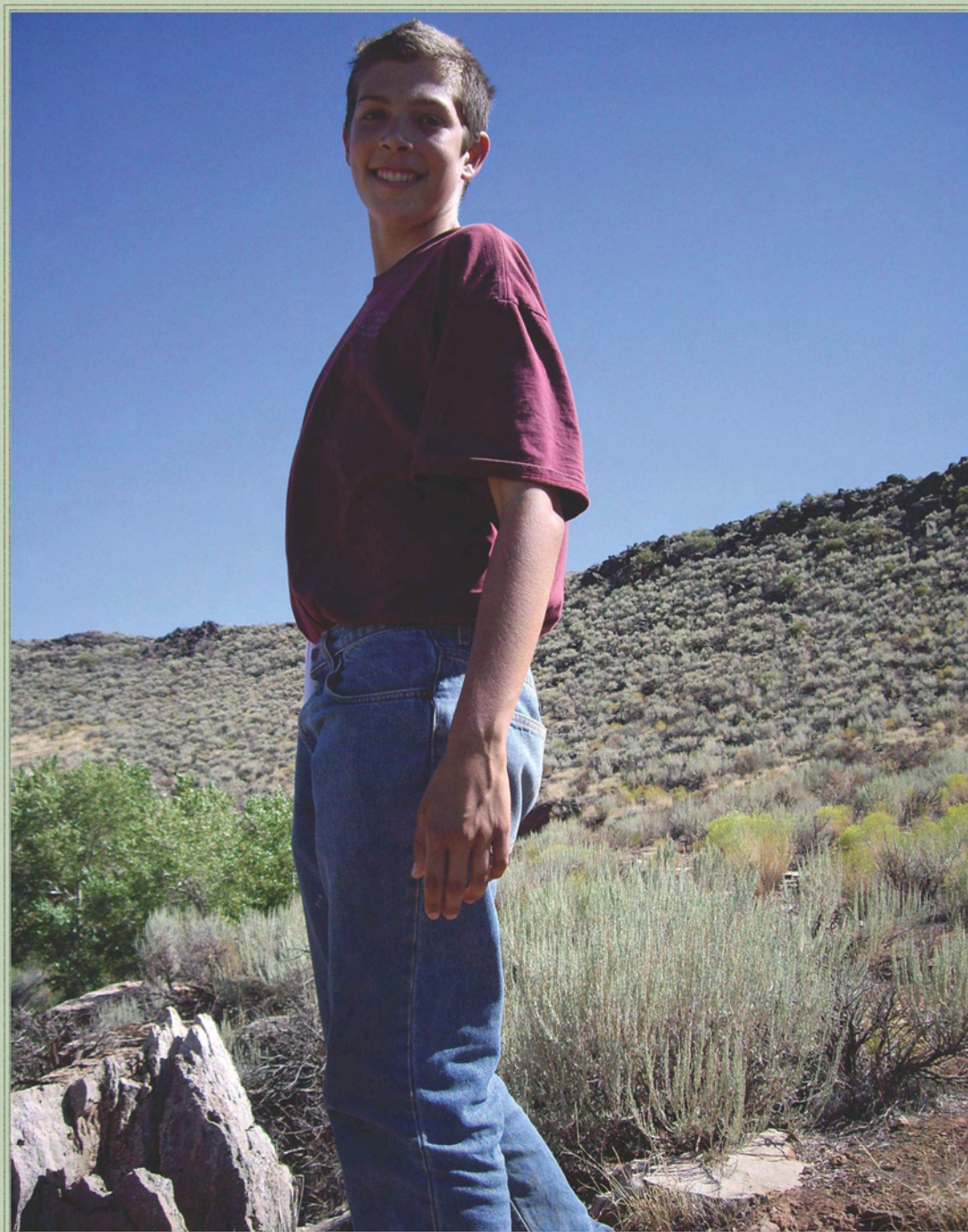
God then took James up to Heaven so that you might believe it was all part of the plan. James was chosen by God for something far more important than earthly life. James was ready now to do God's work. Work he had prepared for his entire life. I know in my heart that James is in Heaven with all of God's children who look up to him for guidance and he is truly happy...

When we close our eyes,
we can see him
When we whisper his name,
we can hear him
And when we reach with our hearts,
we can touch him...

James' life impacted many of us, and with his passing, he left us this message:

Always remember, as you walk through life, the people you meet will help you pave your pathway to Heaven by giving you a chance to respond to their special needs in a compassionate way. By choosing to love with your heart in every way you get closer to Heaven.

James was helping me quilt my pathway to Heaven through my loving response to Sue and her family. One day I sat with Sue and told her what a great life I had. The births of my children were the most precious gifts. I felt so grateful for everything I had in this world. I have an inner peace now and I feel I have added to my quilted path.



I was reminded of something that James' dad said, "James stepped into the light and found peace".

I want to thank my family for their loving support and patience as I worked on this very special quilt. Lastly, I thank God for giving me this past evening, all alone with the rare quiet time at night to sit at my computer and write this story.

Goodnight James. We know you are safe now and in God's hands. Your spirit will be watching over us for the rest of our lives.

Thank you James for everything. I will never forget you...

The experience of making this quilt has inspired the launching of Coronado Keepsake Quilts. I hope that through this endeavor, I can help to bring joy and lasting memories to others with a keepsake quilt.





"May this writing help to heal your soul."

In loving memory of James