

## MY SON, MY HERO

It's been one year since my son's Heavenly homecoming. I have received many letters expressing how Jonathan Mathew Franco has impacted people's lives. These have given me a deeper admiration towards the young man whose short life benefited many.

Jonathan wanted to be in law enforcement since he was a small child when he became enamored with a pair of toy guns, holsters and a shiny, metal sheriff's badge.

"When I grow up I want to be a policeman!" I can still hear the excitement in his small voice. The desire persisted into his early teens until he began driving.

"Why do the cops have it out for me, Mom?" He questioned disgustedly. "I have been pulled over seventeen times! Seventeen times, Mom, seventeen! I am not even doing anything wrong!" He was pulled over several more times after that.

I thought it was pretty crazy myself, considering he rarely got a ticket. Jonathan worked night shifts at Mc Donald's and came home very late. He also liked wearing his baseball cap backwards which was a sign of gang members at the time. The police wanted to make sure he was not involved in a gang. When he began attending college, Jonathan shared an apartment with roommates in Coeur d' Alene and held weekly Bible studies, drawing crowds. This bothered some neighbors and the police were called several times.

The way he described it to me, the police officer came to his door and asked what all the kids were doing in his apartment as he looked around the circle of kids sitting quietly.

"We are just having a Bible study." Jonathan said.

"What's everybody holding in their hands?" The police officer asked.

"Bibles!" Jonathan said holding his Bible up. Some of the kids also held theirs up. The police officer eyed them suspiciously, then left. This happened more than once.

"I can't believe they are hassling me for having a Bible study in my own place! A Bible study, Mom!" He protested on more than one occasion. "There are plenty of kids out there breaking the law. We are just minding our business quietly reading the Bible!"

But what really turned him off to the police was one day when he was driving to NIC in a heavy rain. He got pulled over for what he called: "No reason at all." According to him, the officer had him stand outside of the car while he searched his car and found nothing. Jonathan was soaked and late for his class. His anger was further fueled as his friends drove by and waved at him. Indignant, he went to the police department and demanded to see the police chief.

"I wanted to be a police officer for years," he told the chief, "but after you guys keep harassing me, I never want to be a police officer now! I don't want to do that to kids"

Once the chief calmed him down, he asked Jonathan to go on ride-a-longs with some of the police officers so that he could see what the officers had to put up with. They were often disrespected, called profanities and treated very poorly. He explained that each officer put his life on the line daily for the benefit of the public. After going on several rides, Jonathan gained a new respect for the police department. The spark was reignited.

In February 2007, Jonathan graduated from the police academy and joined Rathdrum Police Department. While on duty he delighted in helping kids and teens. He went out of his way for people. In his bold passion for Christ, he often found himself helping and encouraging people in need even on his own time. He continued Bible studies until that fateful day September 24, 2011. A fatal motorcycle accident took his life.

I just attended a field dedication in memory of my son in Rathdrum, at the new Majestic Park this past Saturday. I am greatly honored and pleased for my son. He's been honored in this way for his love and loyalty to the citizens of Rathdrum as a police officer.

But all that is only a fraction of the reason why I call my son, my hero.

Jonathan made it over a mountain of obstacles throughout his teenage years. Life had been relatively even keeled, until the latter end of his 12<sup>th</sup> year in 1996. His safe world became shattered by divorce. This was a painfully difficult time for our family as I struggled to raise three teens alone. I only remember the following years as a whirlwind of overwhelming chaos. Daily survival meant a constant fight to keep my family in one piece without any family support, as I had no family, and was without child support. I worked multiple jobs, just one summer I worked one full time and three part time jobs, yet was still unable to make ends meet. On top of that I "inherited" an avalanche of debt I didn't create, about \$80,000, thanks to Idaho's community property laws. My kids had to put up with a frazzled, overworked, sleep deprived and grumpy mother as we waded through debt and poverty. Along with that, they had to deal with the painful rejection of paternal abandonment. Their father quickly left town leaving a trail of unfulfilled business transactions that deeply hurt family friends and stigmatized our whole family. I say all of this because any one of these struggles alone would have been enough to break even an adult. This teenage boy was severely affected by all of these at once. That's what makes Jonathan's vigor for living a clean life before God so amazing.

Jonathan fell into such a deep depression. I couldn't stop thinking about it but felt helpless. His frame of mind and future were at stake. At such a perilous time in a teenage boy's life, he was a perfect candidate for very serious trouble. Fearing the worst, I called the school and youth group he attended, asking for someone to please come along side my son. To this day I am eternally grateful to Almighty God for giving him strength and to those who stepped up offering counsel and comfort for my kids when I was fighting for the survival of my family and was unable to be the support I wanted and needed to be.

While Jonathan could have turned to drugs, alcohol, crime or violence, he overcame gigantic obstacles by choosing to turn to the loving and living God of the Bible he had

known since childhood. But it didn't stop there. He lived out his faith and continued to spread that love to everyone his life touched with his open heart and open door policy. Jonathan pulled strength from his cemented faith in God and held on to the determination to make it over the wall of pain and grief during his teenage and early adult years. Rather than letting these destroy him, he managed to jump an unbelievable hurdle of obstacles that many teenagers and young people are not able to scale. He rose over them to become a fine police officer, often going beyond the call of duty. In his personal life he shared his faith, love and encouragement to all who came his way.

It is because of this determination, stamina, love and faith that my son has earned more than deep admiration from his mother, but the place of a hero in my heart. I hope and pray this story at least inspires one person to keep going when you feel like giving up, to reach out for help if your journey becomes unbearable and to always know that God believes in you, and offers his strength to you through Jesus, just as he did for Jonathan.