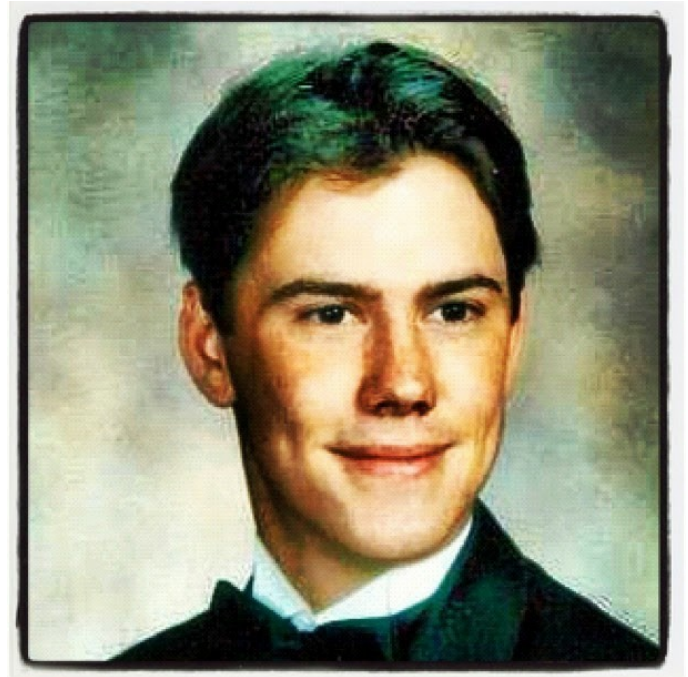


Coming Full Circle

By: Vinnie Favale

Today is November 21st...the 10th anniversary of the passing of DJ Wheeler. DJ would have been 28 years old this year. I'd like to think that he is, in fact, 28 years old in some parallel universe. I never met DJ but I feel like I know him by heart. I read about his passing in the local paper back in 2003. His obituary stayed with me for a long time. There were many reasons for that (some obvious and some that took awhile to reveal themselves). My son was 16 at the time and attended the same high school as DJ. So right there you can't help put yourself (with a shudder) in his family's position. DJ was survived by his parents (Dennis and Joanne) and two sisters (Erin and Alison). One of the reasons I had trouble shaking that dark cloud that had come over me was because I HAD been in that position many years earlier.



Having gone through the loss of my brothers (Frankie and Johnny) over a two year period back in 1976, my heart was breaking for the entire Wheeler family. And in some ways even more so at that moment for Erin and Alison and how they were going to face the challenges that are unique to the loss of a sibling. When my brothers died, I was affected in ways that took me many years to sort out. At the time, I had to balance my own grief with that of my parents for having just lost their two children. In my mind, my grief had to take a back seat. On top of that, if you have other siblings like I do, they are going through the same exact thing as you are (the back seat is getting crowded). Throw in a healthy dose of survivor's guilt and you get the picture. Basically, everyone in the family retires to their respective corners of the world, trying to figure out how to get by. Now it was 30 years from my own loss and suddenly I was projecting all of these feelings on two sisters whom I had never met. But what could I do? I didn't know this family and even if I met them what could I possibly say to make them feel better? So I just tried to bury it in the back of my mind where all the other sad stuff accumulates and focused on the regular distractions of life.

About a week after DJ's passing I was driving my son to his weekly soccer game. After passing a local landmark I realized that I was near the exact spot that the accident occurred. DJ was the only one of five passengers in who lost his life when the car he was riding in struck a tree on the side of the road. A few minutes later I noticed the skid marks where the car veered off and then in a flash, just to my left I passed THE tree. It had only been a week and an ad hoc memorial was already in place (and would grow in the coming weeks). DJ's high school graduation photo, a Shrek doll, flowers, the Irish flag, hand written notes from his many friends. While following my normal travel routine, I couldn't avoid driving by that tree. A week later was one of the saddest sights. It was Thanksgiving morning and there were about twelve high school kids gathered in a circle around the tree. When someone we love dies, they end up in a cemetery (the ultimate gated community). And

most cemeteries are separated far enough from us so that we can attempt to get back to our day-to-day lives and feed into the illusion that life goes on. But it's those memorial trees that crop up on the highways and the side roads (often with the remnants of a lone wreath) that in some ways carry more weight than a beautifully carved marble headstone. Driving by DJ's tree week after week had such an effect on me that I was moved to write a song. Now it's important to note that up until that point I dabbled in songwriting and the one song that



anyone ever heard of happened to be the worst songs ever written. But like a hand on the planchette of a Ouija Board, I gave into the impulse and wrote a song called "*Nineteen*". I wrote it from the point of view of a young man who had just passed and who was trying to convey to his mom that even though he died young, he still had a great life. I put myself in DJ's shoes and wrote about both of our lives.

Thanks to three very talented friends (Eric Graner, John Titta and Patrick Barry), I was able to produce a beautiful heart felt song. Great, I had it out of my system. Time to get on with life. But either DJ (a sweet thought) or G-d (a giant leap of faith) or whatever cosmic force; someone had other plans for me. Week after week, month after month and eventually YEAR after YEAR the songs flowed out of me from driving past that tree. After about four years I had a batch of songs and a very rough idea for a story that would be the foundation for "*Hereafter Musical*"...a musical that would explore how we dealt with the loss of a loved one.

In 2007, thanks to some mutual friends, I finally had the honor of meeting the Wheeler family. Quite honestly I was intimidated and a little worried to meet with them. Here I was, a complete stranger, writing songs and contemplating a full-fledged musical that was triggered by the loss of their son, their brother. I knew what I was doing was coming from the right place, a pure place, but I wouldn't have blamed them for one minute if they felt uncomfortable. And if it came to it, I would have gladly scrapped the whole idea.

Thankfully it never came to that. Ali, Erin and I had an instant connection. These two girls who I felt such a bond with were now in my home, sharing their brother with me in a way that made us all feel like he was in the room with us. And Joanna was amazing. Just four years removed from such a tragic loss and here she was with open arms for me and my family, clearly the glue keeping it all together (and reminding me SO much of my own mother). I do have to be honest; Dennis Wheeler scared the crap out of me. He was not a man of many words that night and the few he said to me (like giving me a long, hard look and asking "*What's with this obsession you have about death*") had me stammering. And you know what? Who could blame him? The song titles from the show alone would have any sane person running to a grief counselor. But I also remember the look on his face when I played them "*Nineteen*". They have been in the show's corner from that day onward. Shortly after I meet the Wheelers, I met Frankie Keane who would soon loom large in the creation of the final version of the show.

So here we are...ten years later and *Hereafter Musical* is still VERY much alive. I can't believe this show is ten years old. We've had concerts, readings, workshops, a CD of beautiful music, a successful off-Broadway production. And 2014 will probably be one of our biggest years as we are currently preparing for an open

ended relaunch of the show. It's interesting when you consider that my connection with the Wheeler family and my inspiration for bringing this show to life was all based on the loss of my two brothers...yet the sibling angle is not part of the show in any way. I guess I still haven't figured out yet how to tell that story. But G-d bless my wife Debbie for allowing us incorporate her life and the loss of her mother Sylvia into the story. And



thank you Wheeler family for sharing DJ with us and trusting that what we put on that stage honors DJ's memory. I'll end it with this. In the spring of 2012, our show made it's big Off-Broadway debut at Theater 80. The show had left the safe nest of Middletown, NJ and moved to New York City.

The entire Wheeler family came out in full force (in a rented bus no less) to support our effort and share what was a momentous occasion in the show's history. We had a limited run (by design) and took a much-needed break when the run was over. It was the Sunday after the show had closed and I was feeling grateful, wistful and more than a little blue that were going to be done for a while. There was a light but steady rain as Debbie, Jon and I were running errands. We were heading back home, and invariably we found ourselves approaching DJ's memorial tree. In recent years, I'm sad to say, I may have passed the tree on more than a few occasions without giving it the pause I did in the early years. But this time I was hyper sensitive. This is where it all started and I wanted to take it all in. I wanted to go back in time to 2003, to the moment when I first had those feelings for the Wheeler family. I rolled down the window paying no mind to the rain...I needed to get good look. I don't think in all of the years leading up to that day I had ever stopped the car. It's a busy road and the tree just comes up on you. We didn't plan on stopping this time but traffic was light so Debbie was going to slow down enough for us to get a good look. As we approached the tree, I noticed something from the distance that wasn't there before. As we got closer my heart literally skipped a beat and I asked Debbie to pull over so that we could get a good look. And right there, nailed to the tree, right next to DJ's photo and mementos from his life, was a "Hereafter Musical" t-shirt put up by his family. It was humbling and the ultimate bond between the Wheeler family and I. DJ's life, my life and the life of our show had not only come full circle but had become one. It's moments like that when I believe there is a life after death.



"Rest In Peace" DJ...Son, Brother, Friend from Vinnie Favale and the entire "Hereafter Musical" family.