



## **Proud and honored to be Austin Derek McKaig's Parents**

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Let me share a story with you of a very ordinary, but extremely extraordinary soldier. Austin grew up in Norman, Oklahoma with a rare group of young men and women who grew to be as close as brothers and sisters. They laughed together and cried together and were truly a unique group of kids.

Austin was the clown of the group and had a unique personality that brought everyone together regardless of their race or social status. He saw no negative differences in the color or creed of others that were unlike him. He loved his friends and family as much or more than anyone else I have ever known. You could talk to many of his friends from many different groups and nine out of ten of them would tell you that Austin was their very best friend. I found that extremely rare and it told me what kind of young man he really was. The statement "to have a good friend you have to be a good friend" was never more demonstrated.

Austin wasn't a perfect young man. He didn't have much athletic ability, but what he lacked in ability; he made up with heart. He had a heart like you rarely see. Although he didn't excel in sports, he gave a hundred and ten percent when called upon.

He once had a basketball coach who truly loved him and realized Austin's limited ability and lack of speed on the court. He gave him the nickname "wheels". Unlike most kids, He didn't take offence to the nickname, he cherished it. He took adversity and turned it into humor in a way only Austin could do. All of his friends, as well as their parents, always cheered for him. They all loved him.

He was an average student, but was popular with all of his teachers. He especially loved school activities and was one of the schools greatest fans. Most of his enjoyment was truly found outside the classroom. School dances were one of his favorites and he could dance with the best of them.

His attitude towards life taught me the meaning of the phrase "Live life to the fullest"; never knowing if tomorrow would ever come. His sense of humor was the engine that drove his personality. Just knowing Austin would brighten your day.

Austin enrolled in college at the University of Oklahoma in the fall of 1999 and found early on that the classroom wasn't for him, but fraternity life was his life's calling. Brotherhood and fellowship were right down his alley. He took to fraternity life like a duck to water and never missed a date party or missed an opportunity to buy a tee shirt. Game day was the ultimate high Austin could reach. Oklahoma football was one of the greatest events of his college days.

After three and a half years, Austin decided that it was time to do something more productive with his life. What he did next not only shocked us, but made us extremely proud. He joined one of the greatest fraternities of all; he joined the United States Army. He admitted wanting to be a soldier since childhood. He took the military exam and scored sixty-eight with the national average being thirty-six. This told us as parents that maybe the money we spent on his college education wasn't wasted.

All wasn't quite as easy as it seemed, for he was out of shape and twenty pounds overweight. What happened next was only fitting; you see when we moved to Norman in the middle of Austin's fourth grade year, a young classmate by the name of Mike befriended Austin and made him part of the group. Two years prior to Austin joining the Army, Mike had enlisted in the Marine Reserve's, so being the friend he was, he helped Austin get into shape. Well, two months of hard work passed and it came time to weigh in. He was accepted and met his mandatory weight by a single pound.

Then the time came for his departure. We as parents had mixed emotions, extreme pride as well as sadness. We wrote him daily and so did many of his friends. As he wrote back, he expressed his only means of survival were the letters of support and church on Sundays. Austin got reacquainted with God, which became the greatest blessing of all. The first three weeks were the most demanding physically and mentally, but soon passed and was able to endure only because of our extreme love as a family.

Janis and I went to graduation and both cried. We were so very glad to see him and so proud of his accomplishment. He not only endured camp in extreme cold conditions, but also did it without a single trip to the infirmary. Just as he did his whole life, he made many unique relationships with fellow soldiers. His best friend was an African American young man from Louisiana by the name of Jarvis, whom was injured during camp and was sent home.

Our reunion was short lived and he was off to AIT training in Georgia being selected for one of the best jobs the Army has to offer, satellite communications. He went through training and graduated with seven other soldiers. The first orders were deployment to Yongsan, South Korea for thirteen months. Janis and I didn't know if we could endure the time and distance of our separation.

Before his departure, he was awarded two weeks service at the Army recruiter's office in Norman, and then was to have two weeks leave prior to deployment. He was finally home with his family and friends. Austin was extremely proud of what he had accomplished. His friends wanted to hear all of the stories related to boot camp and AIT school. He made the commit "I have a great respect for men and a woman in uniform, to graduate boot camp is an amazing accomplishment." Austin matured into a great young man in that short six-month period.

Life was great at the McKaig house. We seemed to have everything going our way. Tyler was doing well and Austin had grown up and found purpose in his life. That soon all came crashing down. Thursday, July 31<sup>st</sup>. Austin asked the Army recruiter if he could take the day off to spend with his mother and friends, which was granted. They left for Dallas to look at Jeanne's new house, check the mail and visit one of his dearest friends, Jessica, who lived in Dallas and was to start a new job as a school teacher. They had the time of their life;

Austin had his favorite food for lunch and his second for dinner. He shopped with the girls, never complaining, only making the comment that he was glad to be anywhere. Austin enjoyed the day laughing and joking with the girls.

Traffic was terrible in Dallas, which made for a late start for their trip home. Whitley and Austin reminisced of their younger school days. They were having a great time. Then tragedy struck, Jeanne swerved to miss a bobcat and rolled the car ejecting Austin from the automobile and ending his life here on earth. It must have been his destiny, because every safety feature of the car failed. The seat belt didn't hold him, the side air bags didn't deploy and the doors came open. Jeanne, Whitley and Janis all survived and were held in place by the seatbelts. Austin suffered no pain and left this earth to be with the Lord Thursday July 31, 2003 at 11:36 p.m. The pain remains unbearable.

Thanks for listening to his story. Our family appreciates your support of the Austin Derek McKaig Memorial Scholarship.

God Bless