

In early 2016, Bridger's world was rocked. At nineteen (19) months old, we introduced him to his brand-new baby sister. As his parents, we were anxious about how he would react, but without hesitation, he jumped into the oversized hospital chair and waited patiently for his turn to hold her. Since that moment, it was clear to us that there was a special bond between him and his sister. His little chubby-cheeked smile filled the room. When his grandpa asked for a turn, Bridger pointed to his chest, indicating that he wasn't giving her up. And so it continued for the next 15 minutes. Anytime anyone attempted to take her from him, again, he would point at his chest. He had waited for his turn, and he wasn't going to give her up.

Since that time, Bridger rarely strays far from his little sister, often to the irritation of her much less social nature. Bridger is gregarious, always learning, so full of love, and an absolute joy to have in our lives. Our home and our hearts would feel empty without him.

Over the last two years, Bridger, his father, and his older brother have taken on the great challenge of training in Brazilian jiu jitsu at their local academy. Bridger has always been one of the youngest and smallest in the class. The size difference has given him the opportunity to confront larger and more experienced opponents regularly. Even though he is often short on attention, Bridger has grown in maturity and ability. We can honestly say that his closest friends train with him at Black Label Jiu Jitsu.

When his brother recently decided to compete in a local grappling tournament, Bridger demanded we register him to compete in the youngest age bracket—much to our consternation. After coming in fourth place, and his brother in first, he was utterly crushed that he did not get a medal. As his parents, we did our best to assure him that it was for fun, that we knew he did his best, and that he showed great heart and courage. Driving home, as we discussed, we could tell his disappointment was the start of a greater determination.

Since COVID-19 hit the world with all its fury, we have also taken time out of our busy schedules to sit as a family each Sunday. We discuss how each family member is doing: going over the various goals set by each of our children and reading from the scriptures. Bridger commonly remembers more than his siblings, actively contributes, and amazes us with his 'old-soul' insights.

So on July 9, 2020, it was no surprise to us that he stepped up to the plate in a major way. Please know that we have no desire to embellish what transpired. Our knowledge of events is necessarily limited to what we heard from our now four (4) year old daughter and from Bridger's own account of events.

While at a friend's house, Bridger and his sister went into the home's back yard. Upon entering the yard, the child with them pointed to one dog and said, "that is the nice dog," and pointed to the other dog in the yard, explaining, "that is the mean one."

Bridger explained how, at that moment, the mean one ran at them. In Bridger's words, "I stepped to the side, in front of my sister so that the dog wouldn't get to her. I kept moving, so it couldn't get past."

Tragically, instead of running off, the dog leaped and latched onto Bridger's cheek. Bridger explained that when the dog bit him, he yelled for his sister to run. After the dog released, Bridger ran to his sister and led her to a more secure part of the yard where he thought they would be safe.

At that point, we understand the dog's owners secured the dog, ran Bridger inside, began applying pressure to the wounds, and called for emergent care. We are forever and sincerely grateful for the love and care they provided. As Bridger's parents, we were, of course, devastated at the news and were immediately by Bridger's side.

Once the firefighters and EMTs arrived, we were able to begin evaluating Bridger's injuries. Unsurprisingly, there was a LOT of blood—so much so that the firefighters asked Bridger if they could cut off his shirt. He refused and said, "My mom likes me in this shirt." It may sound strange, but as the families sat waiting for the EMTs to stabilize Bridger, my wife and I felt a strong spirit of love for all involved.

Bridger's father was able to ride with him in the ambulance, and stay by his side, while his mother went home to care for and comfort the rest of the family. On the ride to the hospital, Bridger said, "I always wanted to ride in an ambulance...but not like this. Maybe I can ride home in one too?" He loves his stress ball ambulance the EMTs gave him, and he has kept it with him as a comfort ever since.

At the hospital, emergency workers immediately wheeled Bridger into a curtained-off area. The only time he cried was when he got the IV. At one point, the assigned animal control officer came to tell us the dog was up to date on its vaccinations. She also explained that the dog's owners were the ones that called to report the incident, that the dog was a 1 year old German Shepard mix rescue, and that the owners decided to put the dog to sleep. Bridger responded, "I don't want anything bad to happen to the dog; is it going to be killed?"

We assured him that the animal police would take care of the dog and that he wouldn't ever need to worry about seeing it again.

The most challenging moment for Bridger's father was during a quiet moment between CAT scans. While he sat in a folding chair next to Bridger's hospital bed, he began to ask about what happened and was able to gather the details above. When Bridger explained how he had shielded his sister, his father asked why he did that. Bridger, in his own words and without hesitation, declared, "If someone had to die, I thought it should be me."

As a family, during a Sunday family time, we had just discussed personal sacrifice and service. Yet, at that moment, Bridger was the teacher. Bridger's father was able to keep it together just long enough for emergency workers to wheel Bridger into surgery. The surgery would be a nearly two (2) hour procedure; it involved pulling his face and scalp back together, holding it in place with over 90 stitches. Before leaving the ER for surgery, the incredible supervising doctor, Doctor Jordan Greer II, turned to Bridger's father and said, "I want you to know he is the bravest patient I've ever had...I really mean it."

The following morning—when his skilled an amazing plastic surgeon—Dr. Joseph F. Looby, checked in, he asked Bridger whether he had any pets.

Bridger explained that he had two dogs, Elektra and Thor. When asked what kind of dogs they were, Bridger shrugged his shoulders and said, "nice ones."

Upon returning home, Bridger's little sister was so excited to see him. She ran to her father and declared that Bridger had protected her, that there was sooooooooooooo much blood, and that she was "totally freaked out." Bridger's whole family now appreciates all those little moments a little more now, understanding with a new realization of how fast life can turn.

In an effort to cheer Bridger up, his amazing Aunt Nicole shared his story in Instagram in hopes of getting just a few shout-outs from Bridger's favorite big-screen superheroes (or possibly Mr. Beast—his favorite YouTube personality). The response has been both surprising and humbling. Our family was entirely unprepared. We are so appreciative of all the kind words, love, and prayers extended. Numerous times throughout the day, we will break into genuine tears after reading how our little Bridger touched a life. At the time of this release, we have received tender, heartfelt messages from his heroes and many others including: Hugh Jackman, Zachary Levi, Tom Holland, Anne Hathaway, the Russo brothers, Robbie Amell, and Mark Ruffalo, as well countless others from around the world. The love and support we have received astounds us.

Many have asked how they can help. We are so very grateful but believe there are so many with a greater need. After much prayer and consideration, we ask that if you would like to help, please consider contributing to the following organizations:

Mission 22—an organization dedicated to winning the war against veteran suicide,

Operation Underground Railroad—committed to the permanent eradication of child sex trafficking,
or

The Wounded Warrior Project—an organization whose goal is, "to help bring independence back to our nation's (USA) most severely wounded veterans."

We want to make clear how we do not plan on asking for any financial assistance. As such, we would unequivocally condemn any who would exploit our son's adversity to further a personal agenda. We also humbly request that you keep the dog's owners in your prayers and forego any superficial judgments—because we love them.

Somewhat ironically, prior to Bridger's injury, our family had been discussing what we would say if we could spread one single message to the entire world. We had no real expectation that we'd ever get a chance. Heaven knows this year has kind of sucked and could use more positive messages.

After Bridger's actions, our family has settled on a simple request: may we each actively strive to bear one another's burdens; stand up for and protect those that are weak, oppressed, or those whom the world might forsake; mourn with those that mourn, comfort those that need comfort, and love one another. May we follow Bridger's example, approach the world as a child, and bring greater peace to our own homes, communities, states, and countries.