

Photo by Anetorius Wallace

Robby, Stephanie, and  
Mason McDaniel

# GRAEME'S SUPERHEROES

After the devastating loss of their 2-year-old son, Graeme, Robby and Stephanie McDaniel raise awareness for congenital heart defects through fundraisers and community outreach

*Written by Ashley Lancaster | Select photography courtesy of the McDaniel family*



Graeme McDaniel was born on December 8, 2012 to a loving family and an extreme obstacle to overcome. His mother, Stephanie, was at her 34-week appointment when the doctor detected the baby's heart rate to be in the 70s, dangerously low, and ordered an emergency delivery. After Graeme's delivery, doctors discovered a serious heart condition - double outlet right ventricle, malposed great vessels, ventricular septal defect, and aortic valve hypoplasia, among others. He was rushed to Texas Children's Hospital - Medical Center and underwent two major cardiac surgeries as a newborn baby, had a pacemaker inserted along with a pulmonary artery band, and a coarctation repair. For the next few weeks, Graeme began to spread the contagious, innocent happiness that would become his legacy.

### **A LIFE FULL OF JOY**

After 44 days, Graeme was released from the NICU and began life with his mom, dad, and older brother Mason. From the start, his mom could tell that Graeme had a special kind of joy. "Although he had plenty of excuses not to be, he was the happiest little kid we could ask for. He had an irresistible smile, giant brown eyes, and his voice was pure innocence. He was so smart," she says.

Graeme's infectious smile brought joy to all who met him until the strain of his medical condition became too much for his little body to endure. Graeme passed away in May 2015, before his third birthday, leaving his family with shattering grief but also gratitude for the time they had with such an angel. "We are so blessed that we were able to spend these last two and a half years with him. He has taught us so much about family, love, and the gift of children," says Stephanie.

### **KEEP MOVING FORWARD**

In the days that followed, a new obstacle presented itself to the McDaniel family as they tried living life without their beloved son. That's when mercy stepped in and gave them a mission to propel them forward and give them hope.

"The idea [for Graeme's Superheroes] wasn't really ours at all," says Robby McDaniel. "We have some really good friends that love us. They actually started it by selling shirts to raise awareness and funds for The Children's Heart Foundation without us knowing at all. Right before they

rolled it out, they came to get our permission, but they did it all on their own." Fueled by their first-hand experience and overwhelming positive community feedback, the McDaniel family began started organizing events that would create awareness about congenital heart defects (CHD) in children and help families going through a similar struggle.

### **HONORING GRAEME'S LEGACY**

The overall goal for Graeme's Superheroes is to raise awareness about CHD and to raise money for research, something that is well overdue in the medical world. Currently, one in 100 babies are born with CHD, and 25% of those babies will need heart surgery or some kind of serious

intervention to survive. The statistics are frightening, but the McDaniel family is confident that with enough interest and support generated, big changes could be made. "Doctors can do things now that were impossible 10 or 20 years ago. I think there will be huge breakthroughs in the very near future," says Stephanie.

While funding research and awareness is of critical importance, Graeme's Superheroes have big dreams for the future that focus on the everyday challenges of facing CHD. "Eventually, we would also like to directly help families affected by CHD. We were so touched when groups reached out to us while we were in the hospital. Graeme got a cape from an organization called Heart Heroes. They make them and give them out to children with CHD. It really helps to know that there are other people who are going through the same things you are," says Robby. These

are the kinds of blessings that Graeme's Superheroes wants to be able to provide, a dream that will only be realized with the help and support of the community. So far, the group has gone above and beyond what they thought was possible. In 2015, they raised \$28,000 for the Children's Heart Foundation.

The McDaniels also have the support of countless friends and relatives that have held them up during the most difficult times, even strangers are getting involved. "It is indescribable how we feel when we see a complete stranger wearing one of Graeme's shirts or even when someone tells us how much they like our shirt," says Stephanie. The organization will hold Graeme's Run on February 27, 2016, and all proceeds from T-shirt sales will be donated to The Children's Heart Foundation.



In honor of Graeme, friends of the McDaniel family came up with Graeme's Superheroes

The McDaniel family is bringing hope and joy to others in honor of Graeme



“Graeme is our superhero. We were in awe of everything he had to endure, and he handled it like a champ.”

- Stephanie McDaniel

**A SOURCE OF STRENGTH**

Although the grief could be crippling, the McDaniels have Graeme’s memory to give them hope and strength to keep going. “Graeme is our superhero. We were in awe of everything he had to endure, and he handled it like a champ. He wanted to do whatever he could to please whoever was in his circle at the time. He would always throw a curvy little grin your way when he thought you needed it. Now we want to take over and be his superheroes,” says Stephanie.

Each day, the McDaniels are faced with a decision: despair or persevere. With the help of Graeme’s memory, they are not only persevering, but bringing hope and comfort to others. “He taught us how important family is and that we need to live in the present. He showed us how great our friends are. He still teaches us things all the time,” says Stephanie. “We see him everywhere.” **KM**



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