

Lowell Sun
Lowell, MA

Monday, September 26, 2005

Old Friends Embrace New Challenges

by Lisa Redmond, Sun Staff

When Jason Hilton and his buddies played high-school football 17 years ago they had a banner they hung on the field before every game.

The banner read, "United We Stand."

"We were all best friends," said Lowell attorney Patrick Richard. "There wasn't anything we wouldn't do for one another."

But those bonds of friendship have been tested in the past few years.

"We all got older and spread out. I lost track of Jason," Richard admitted.

Then Richard bumped into Hilton's mother, Gail Sprague, at the grocery store. He asked about her son with a surprising result.

"She told me he was in a nursing home," Richard said. "I was shocked."

Hilton became stricken with Huntington's Disease, an inherited brain disorder resulting in the slow and irreversible loss of both mental and physical capabilities, when he was 30. Hilton's father had died from the same disease.

"He handles it well," Sprague said of her son. "He has an awesome attitude."

Huntington's Disease is a hereditary, degenerative and ultimately fatal disease of the brain that causes changes in personality, progressive loss of memory and cognitive ability, and a characteristic uncontrolled jerking motion known as Huntington's chorea. There is no known cure or effective treatment. A person who carries the mutant Huntington's gene may pass it on unknowingly because the disease often manifests in early to late middle-age, generally after a carrier's children have already been born.

Huntington's Disease was a little-known illness until it infected Woodie Guthrie, a famous folk singer from the 1920s who showed symptoms of the disease. In 1967, he died, putting Huntington's Disease on the map.

More than 30,000 people in the United States are currently diagnosed with Huntington's Disease, and each of their siblings and children have a 50 percent chance of developing it, according to the Huntington's Disease Society of America [www.hdsa.org].

At 35, Hilton lives at the Lowell Healthcare Center, a nursing facility in the city. That's when the former teammates rallied.

Each month, Richard and some of his former teammates of the Merrimack, N.H. High School Varsity football team [Class of 1988] visit their friend at the nursing home. Although the friends are scattered between Massachusetts and New Hampshire, they still come.

Daniel Gimore, of Groton, said he was "extremely shocked" that this disease had afflicted his longtime friend. "But by doing some of the simple things to help, you appreciate what you have in your life and it's a rewarding feeling," Gilmore said.

Sprague has high praise for her son's friends.

"These guys are totally over the top," said Sprague, who lives in Merrimack, N.H. "They make Jason feel better than any doctor ever could."

Hilton can use a walker, but he is shaky on his feet and he has a tough time speaking, Richard said.

In his honor, his high-school buddies formed "The Friends of Jason Hilton," which has raised thousands of dollars at a golf tournament held in August at the Breakfast Hill Golf Club in Greenland, N.H.

On Sept. 17, a group of Hilton's friends helped sponsor and participated in the Walk to Cure HD at the Sampas Pavilion in Lowell.

Hilton's friends have also taken Hilton and some of his friends from the Healthcare Center to the Spinners and Lock Monsters games.

"We do all this because it allows us to get together while making a difference," Richard said.