

## JASON AND BRIAN, MARCH 16, 1994

*Two very different students with two very different fates ... a director of campus programs watches their lives converge in a surprising way, and her view of students is never the same again.*

**By Lee Burdette Williams**

I'M sitting and looking out the window of my ground floor office as students walk past on the heavily traveled path alongside the building, and as I watch them, I remind myself of what I have learned about them, a lesson that came in the space of a few hours and that I hope I never forget. There are, in our lives, some days and nights that through their events have the singular power to transform how we feel about our work, how we do our work, who we are. And there are students whose presence on campus has that same power. More often than not, they intersect.

Jason and Brian were both members of our junior class that year. They were acquainted with each other, as are most students on our small campus, connected through various social and cocurricular activities, mutual friends, and occasional classes together. Both were familiar faces in my office suite. Jason had been heavily involved in service activities since his first year. Brian was an employee, answering phones, copying memos, filing room reservation forms.

In their personalities, there were few similarities. Jason was brash, provocative, intensely intellectual, and alternately angry and hopeful, depending on his most recent run-in with the harsh realities of the world. His motivation to serve others seemed to rise out of a desperate rage at an unfair system. Brian was soft-spoken and gentle, not terribly reliable but eminently likable. A good student with friends all over campus, Brian went quietly about his business, joining service organizations, committing his energy and considerable kindness to helping others, with little notice or fanfare attached.

I had known Jason since I first came to campus, at the start of his sophomore year, when his reputation was made known to me—as one of the brightest of his exceptionally strong class, charismatic, with a heart for serving others. He was remarkably articulate and persuasive, so much so that he convinced me, against my better judgment, that he was the ideal person to lead

our student volunteer coordinating organization, a vast undertaking for any student, much less one of Jason's questionable organizational skills. It wasn't that he was a flake. Jason was just determined to be unconventional and hence held great disdain for traditional authority, structure, and process. He was one of the few student leaders I knew who never carried a day planner.

Jason lasted in that particular leadership position about two months, until the day he stormed out of my office, calling me a controlling fascist who cared more about the organization's reputation than the work itself. He did not appreciate my noting that under his *laissez-faire* guidance, not much work was getting done. He resigned in front of the student board moments later. I didn't see him for months after that.

I heard that he was getting increasingly involved with drugs, a fact made clear by his occasional contributions to our campus's electronic bulletin board. His writing was, as always, excellent—light years beyond most of his peers. His arguments in favor of drug use, while sometimes flawed, were always compelling.

Brian, unlike Jason, was slight in build. Under six feet, with dark wavy hair, Brian dressed in a casual and rumpled style. His pants, usually khakis, were baggy and unpressed. He wore a sweater over an untucked shirt and sneakers. On his head, he often wore a tan fisherman's hat or baseball cap. I inherited him as a student staff member, and though he was unfailingly pleasant on the phone, he got about one message out of four completely wrong. I did not have the heart to fire him. Brian was the kind of person whose earnestness kept him in good stead with others. One could overlook the garbled messages when confronted with Brian's sleepy grin.

---

*Lee Burdette Williams* is director of campus programs and organizations at Albion College.

Jason's junior year was fraught with difficulties. He moved out of his fraternity house, citing difficulties with his "brothers." His former roommate, whom Jason had once referred to as "the best friend I have ever known," lost touch with him quickly. I once asked Jay, the roommate, if he had seen Jason recently. Jay leaned heavily on the frame of my office door, sighed, shrugged, and said, "Lee, I don't even know who he is anymore."

Brian, meanwhile, had pledged a coed service fraternity, and I often saw his name on its sign-up lists, occasionally catching sight of him around town at service project sites.

One morning, our campus safety director told

was growing quickly but that that was probably a good sign—benign tumors, they told him, can be very aggressive.

Brian's condition was updated every few hours on the electronic bulletin board. His best friend, Pete, reported that Brian was in good spirits, appreciated the calls he was getting, and hoped to be back the following week. On Tuesday, Pete reported that Brian was scheduled for surgery the next day and that he said hello to everyone.

The police continued to pressure Jason. No, he had never been to the fraternity house at a nearby college from which the check was stolen. No, he wasn't in trouble with drug dealers. No, he had no idea who

---

*There are, in our lives, some days and nights that through their events have the singular power to transform how we feel about our work, how we do our work, who we are. And there are students whose presence on campus has that same power. More often than not, they intersect.*

---

me the city police wanted to question Jason. Apparently, a teller at Jason's bank had identified him as having cashed a stolen check worth \$1,000. But there were holes in the bank's story. The signature on the stolen check, while his name, was not in his handwriting. The campus safety director asked if I had seen Jason, and I told him Jason had not spoken to me since he resigned his position months before. I was certain, though, that Jason would not have done anything as shady as stealing a check. Such an act would have compromised Jason's stubborn streak of personal integrity. Spring break came, and Jason went home, uncertain of his fate but fervently proclaiming his innocence. But the bank president insisted on pressing charges.

Brian spent spring break in West Virginia with the Albion College's Appalachian Service Project, a group I was proud to advise. He helped build a shed and clean a stretch of river. During the trip, he told the other students that he had a headache that would not go away. He spent the last few days of the trip in his cabin lying on his cot.

On Sunday, two days after Brian's return, he was diagnosed with a brain tumor. He was told that it

would use his name in such a manner. No, he said emphatically, he had not cashed a stolen check.

THAT Wednesday, March 16, I left the office around 6:30 P.M. and went home to dinner. I was reading when the phone rang around nine o'clock. It was the dean, my boss. "Jason's been arrested. He's in the city jail." I asked what we could do, how we could get him out so he wouldn't have to spend the night in jail. "We can't," said the dean. "There's no bail set because it's a felony. He's in till tomorrow when they'll arraign him." I found I remained incredulous about the stolen check. Even if Jason had been felled by such circumstances that he would steal, which to me would represent an outrageous shift of character, he was too smart to do it in a way that would easily mark him.

I fell asleep fitfully, wondering how it must feel to be in jail for a crime one didn't commit. I wondered if Jason's parents, with whom he had a stormy relationship, knew where he was. I wondered if he had a lawyer.

I was going through all these questions in a state of half-consciousness when the phone rang again. It was 12:30 A.M. Again, it was the dean. "Brian died

this evening," he said. In my sleepy state, it took me a moment to make sense of this. I was still thinking of Jason, and for a moment confused him with Brian. The dean's voice continued. "They took him to surgery, and when they opened him up and saw the extent of the cancer, they closed him and called a priest to give him last rites. He was pronounced dead shortly after." Having nothing to say, I thanked him for calling and hung up.

I didn't bother to try to sleep. I wandered aimlessly around the house, looking out windows into the blackness. I thought about Jason, who surely must have felt his life was ruined. Was he thinking about his plans for the future—the top-tier graduate school, the doctorate,

semblance of a normal academic life. The case against him was shaky, the police finally admitted, and they agreed to drop charges if he passed a lie detector test.

I saw Jason over the summer, when I took a group of students to a camp where he was working. He told me he had indeed passed the lie detector test, and the charges had been dropped. He had no doubt that he had been framed by one of his fraternity "brothers," but what bothered him more was that other "brothers" knew about it and let him take the fall. His grades were ruined for the semester, and his dreams of graduate school were in jeopardy. But he planned to return for his senior year, graduate, and get on with his life.

---

*Jason was brash, provocative, intensely intellectual, and alternately angry and hopeful, depending on his most recent run-in with the harsh realities of the world... Brian was soft-spoken and gentle, not terribly reliable but eminently likable.*

---

the teaching position at a prestigious college—now all in question? I thought about Brian, whose life was indeed over, and wondered what he had been thinking in the moments before he was wheeled off to surgery. Did it occur to him that he might have been living the last moments of his life?

When the sun rose, I dressed and went to the dean's office. Our health services director told us that Brian was actually on life-support until arrangements could be made for his organs to be donated. The dean passed around Brian's student folder, with a high school photo showing Brian's warm smile and dark eyes. I didn't listen to the discussion of the memorial service.

Brian's life was celebrated at a service later the following week. His friends and family spoke, filling the chapel with laughter and tears, remembering the small details that made Brian's life unique yet so much like the lives of many of our students.

Jason was released the day after his incarceration began. He retained a lawyer and tried to resume some

He did, though his senior year was not a good one. He wanted to write an honors thesis, but the faculty in his department did not support his proposed topic. When they were critical of his initial proposal, he decided to do it on his own. In mid April of that year, he walked into my office. I had not seen or spoken to him since that evening on the sand dune, and I barely recognized him. He was much slimmer, his hair was below his shoulders, and he had a full beard. He handed me an eighty-page paper in a green binder, said it was his honors thesis, and asked me to read it when I had the chance.

I did read it, and about halfway through the document, I found myself transported back to March 16. Jason wrote of his night in jail and of learning from the campus safety director, who visited him there, that Brian had died: "I knew that the next day would be filled with mourners, and that I should be among them. But I could not join them. I was not the best friend of Brian, and that was the part that really

---

*On a campus this size, there is no reason to be surprised that students know each other, especially when they are classmates who live in the same first-year residence hall. But it's easy to forget how, in their intertwined lives, they affect one another.*

---

tormented me. I made a conscious decision: I was no longer going to allow myself to be petty in thought or in deed, I would no longer be fully self-absorbed . . . this is still, to this day, the most important moment of my life."

I was stunned, though without good reason. On a campus this size, there is no reason to be surprised that students know each other, especially when they are classmates who live in the same first-year residence hall. But it's easy to forget how, in their intertwined lives, they affect one another. I thought back to other memorial services during which I had seen students incredibly pained at the death of another student and had realized I had not even known they were connected. Or more positively, I have sat at numerous senior music recitals and seen in the audience students whose attendance suggested an affection more for the performer than the music. Jason's observation was a profound reminder that as much as I think I see of students' lives—in their halls, in the dining room, at activities, in my office—I am seeing only a sliver of their wonderfully, painfully complex lives. I know no more about their lives from those limited interactions than I know about their days from that brief glimpse as they walk by my window.

It was a realization that brought with it a new-found sense of respect for each of them, as well as a humbling sense of my own limitations. Since that day, I no longer feel as though I *really* know my students. I make judgments about them, good and bad. I predict

their courses of action. I listen to them, and I observe them, and I become so familiar with them that I can identify who is in the dining hall by looking at the pile of backpacks lying at the door. But I never really know them. I never see what's beneath the surface they so carefully create and maintain. As I learned that night, I don't know at all what might be going on in their heads, figuratively, as Jason showed me, or quite literally, as I learned from Brian.

Jason graduated—without honors, without fanfare, without plans for his future beyond a summer job. I don't expect to see him again, though I would like to. Brian's Appalachian Service Project comrades took a tree with them on their trip a year after his death and planted it on a lovely hilltop. A student who was on that trip told me later, "I never knew Brian, because I was gone last year, but after hearing people talk about him at the tree planting . . . he was a really great guy, wasn't he?"

"A gift," I answered, and added silently, "to me, to this campus, and in a painfully important way, to Jason."

Now, almost two years later, as I watch students walk past my window, I remind myself of the promise I have made to both Brian and Jason: that I will look beyond the immediately obvious, that I will appreciate students for what I can neither see nor understand, and that I will never again make the arrogant assumption that I know them.

But I *can* still miss them once they're gone, and I do.