

Life lessons from an unlikely source

By Gail McCarthy Staff Writer | Posted: Saturday, October 18, 2014 4:00 am

High school senior Derek Sheckman had everything to live for. The scholar, athlete and young man of letters, already accepted into Tufts University, never had the chance to continue his promise to do his part to make this world a better place.

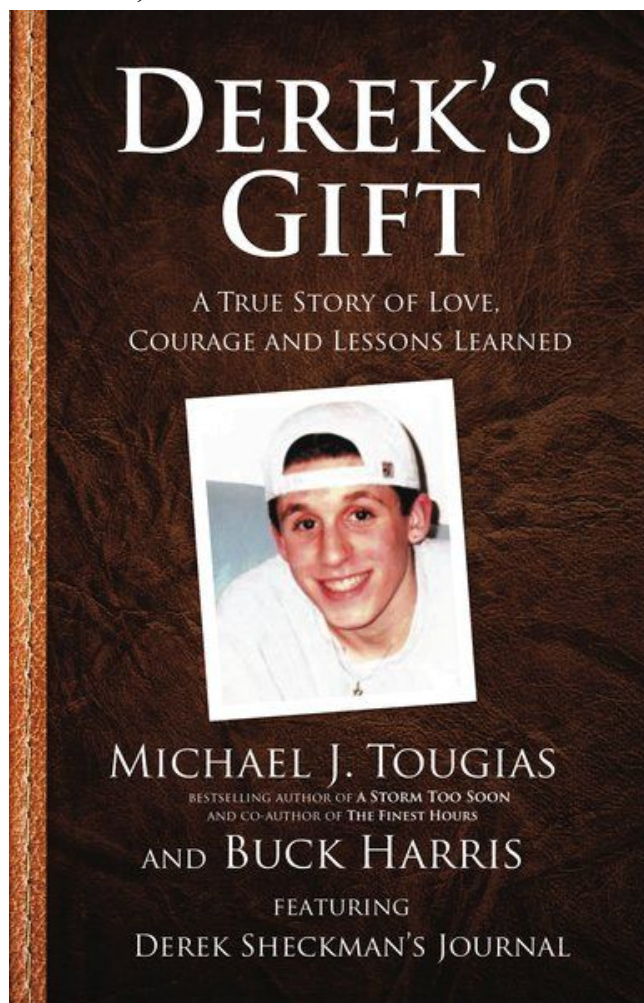
One day, he had a toothache, which turned out to be a rare, aggressive cancer. All during his radiation and chemotherapy treatments, the 17-year-old wrote a journal, which no one read until after his death in January 1998, a year after his diagnosis.

Excerpts were read during the funeral. The teen's poignant words resonated and dozens of friends and family requested copies. One recipient was Gloucester's Buck Harris, a health teacher at Swampscott High School. Derek was a student in his class when the teen first learned of his tumor.

"People were deeply moved by his eloquence and insight," recalled Harris.

This teen's story and Harris' subsequent book will be part of a community event in Rockport next Tuesday (see reader box).

A consummate teacher, Harris — with the blessing of Derek's parents — began using the journal a few years later as a teaching tool in his Contemporary Adolescence classes. He found it to be a motivating force for his students to examine their lives and make changes because of these reflections. Using Derek's journal, the students explore the meaning of life, death, dying, grieving and the myth of adolescent invincibility. The course of study elicited powerful student discussions and written reflections. It continues to be a rite of passage for Swampscott high



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Courtesy photo Gloucester's Buck Harris, a high school teacher, will be part of a book event and discussion related to "Derek's Gift: A True Story of Love, Courage and Lessons Learned," co-written by Harris and best-selling author Michael Tougias on Tuesday, Oct. 21, at 7 p.m. at the Unitarian Universalist Society of Rockport at 4 Cleaves St. in Rockport.

students.

The first half of the journal was filled with the teen's hope that he would beat the rare rhabdomyosarcoma. But when his health deteriorated, he changed his focus to reflecting on his time on Earth and what is precious in life. The teenager faced his own mortality when his peers were planning their futures. He showed even more strength persevering in the wake of a surgery that led to facial deformity.

Derke's lessons are like those detailed in Mitch Albom's memoir "Tuesdays with Morrie," the difference being that his perspective comes from the beginning of a young, promising life, not at the end of a long, well-lived life.

"The journal began as an intimate chronicling of his struggle to survive the horrific tumor growing in his jaw, continued through moments of despair and moments of hope, and finally, captured the remarkable way he came to terms with his impending death," wrote Harris in a teacher's guide.

Harris said his initial motivation to publish the journal came from his students who repeatedly told him that other teenagers should have the opportunity to read it. During the annual Massachusetts Teachers Association conference, Harris attended a workshop on how to get published given by award-winning author Michael Tougas. Tougas is author and co-author of the national bestsellers "The Finest Hours" (soon to be a Disney movie), "Ten Hours until Dawn," "Fatal Forecast," and many others.

When the workshop ended, Harris gave Tougas a copy of Derek's journal.

"He simply suggested that I read it and let him know what I thought. I get a lot of pitches for book ideas, and I was about to say that I was too busy with several projects. But something made me take the journal and start to read it during lunch," said Tougas.

After reading 20 pages, the author was so moved, he called Harris.

"I remember saying that my main emotion wasn't really sadness, but a feeling of love. Love for this 18-year-old student who was such a good writer that you couldn't help but feel connected to him," Tougas recalled.

That was the start of an effort that led to the publication in May of "Derek's Gift: A True Story of Love, Courage and Lessons Learned," co-written by Tougas and Harris.

"It is a remarkable story and there are remarkable lessons," said Harris. "Derek was a contemporary renaissance man, an athlete, scholar, and leader. He was the kind of guy that if he saw a kid sitting alone in the cafeteria he would go to their table."

The main message Harris gleaned from his student is that the meaning of Derek's life is love.

"Never take the help of your family for granted. Never hesitate to tell someone you appreciate them.

In other words, *carpe diem* — seize the day,” said Harris.

Sue Gee, a lifelong educator and an event organizer, was moved by teen’s insights when she read the book.

“It’s a good book for all of us. Anytime in our lives, we can be faced with a friend, parent, child or someone who is facing a terminal illness and how do we find strength to deal with that. Derek started out hopeful but when he realized they did everything they could, he talked about how he wanted to be remembered,” Gee said. “There are insights that are relevant to us all.”

Sandy Sheckman, Derek’s mother, said she was grateful to Tougias and Harris for their determination to get the journal published.

“I’m grateful because it means my son’s life has a legacy that I’m not sure would have happened otherwise,” she said. “I didn’t know for a long time that he was writing a journal and he didn’t want anyone to read it until it was done. None of us saw it until we printed it after he died. I remember I was petrified that I would erase it as I tried to print it out so I invited a good friend over to do this with me.”

She said her son started writing when he thought he was going to recover.

“He thought he would share this journal with the world and when it became clear that he wasn’t going to recover, it became a place he could talk,” said Sheckman. “We didn’t change any words. It has the anger and questioning of an 18-year-old but his conclusions are so mature.”

Gee said this journal of a dying teenager can serve as a beacon showing the way to a more meaningful life.

“He admonishes the reader to live in the present, to live life to the fullest now. Don’t put off telling someone you love them and are grateful for what they have done for you,” wrote Gee in a Unitarian Universalist Society of Rockport newsletter. The society is sponsoring Tuesday’s event.

Gee noted that there are benefits gained from learning about what others have experienced in similar circumstances that can help someone gain clarity about their own situation.

“We realize through Derek’s journal that our bodies are finite. We are not indestructible. No one escapes problems in life. It is how we respond to them that makes the difference,” she wrote. “... And, therein lies the lesson for all who read this enlightening book.”

Organizers want to attract a diverse audience from the Cape Ann community, including teachers, healthcare workers, parents and students.

On a final note, Sandy Sheckman said Derek really did make the world a better place in the time he was here.

“There are countless stories of his helping kids, not even his best friends,” she said. “His legacy continues with annual awards given out in his name at the high school and in the Jewish community. And this year, the Community Mediation Center is giving out a new award in his name in November.”

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Author event and community discussion

What and who: “Derek’s Gift: A True Story of Love, Courage and Lessons Learned,” co-written by Gloucester’s Buck Harris and Michael Tougias.

When: Tuesday, Oct. 21 at 7 p.m.

Where: Unitarian Universalist Society of Rockport at 4 Cleaves St. in Rockport.

How much: Free; book proceeds go to the Derek Sheckman Foundation, which works to battle cancer.