

The story of Kenny Stultz almost ended seven years ago when he was 39 years old.

The middle school choir director and music teacher caught the flu towards the end of school in 2001 and couldn't get rid of it. He went through the usual routine: drank plenty of liquids, tried to get enough rest, and hoped he would wake up the next day feeling better. But he never did. On Sunday, June 24 he couldn't breathe. An ambulance rushed him and his frightened mother to the hospital, where doctors found black liquid in both of his lungs and diagnosed him with a massive infection. Hyperventilating, Kenny passed out, and he didn't wake again for six weeks.

Kenny found out later that doctors were telling his mother he was the sickest man in the hospital and he would probably die. Both lungs were stricken with bacterial pneumonia and his blood was septic. They put him in a medically-induced coma to give his body a chance to recover, and hooked him up to a ventilator, a feeding tube, and a tracheotomy. The prognosis wasn't good.

His mother could only pray. She went to the chapel in the hospital and found a Bible laying open on the altar to Psalms 6:9, "The Lord has heard my petition, the Lord will answer my prayers." She felt at that moment that her prayers had indeed been heard, and her son would be coming home with her.

Miraculously, Kenny came out of the coma six weeks later. He'd already defied the doctors' expectations that he wouldn't live; but now he faced new challenges. The tracheotomy had been in so long doctors said it might take years for him to regain the ability to speak, and they said he would never sing again – a terrible diagnosis for a musician. Being confined to a bed for almost two months had made his muscles so weak that he only had use of one hand. Bedsores had eroded part of his lower spine and required surgery, leaving him with a painful injury to overcome on top of the difficult challenges he already faced. On September 10, the nurses moved him into a new room to prepare him for physical therapy the next day. Kenny's real battle was just beginning.

The next morning, September 11, the planes hit. Kenny couldn't speak because he still had the tracheotomy, but he turned to his mother and mouthed the words, "We've been attacked." Kenny felt attacked, too, lying helpless in a hospital bed while the nation went through its own trial. His strong resolve got a little stronger. "I seemed to parallel my own recovery with the nation's recovery. I felt like America got knocked flat on its back and if it can get up, I can get up."

And get up he did, day after day for grueling therapy, although it would be January before he could walk even 20 feet. Initially, he couldn't even feel his legs, let alone move them. "I had to be lifted out of bed with a crane-like thing and gently laid on a tilt table. I was strapped down and slowly raised to a standing position just to get my heart pumping blood again," he remembers. Later came the exercises so he could lift himself out of the wheelchair, then he learned to walk between the parallel bars, and finally, with a walker. He credits a compassionate physical therapist with pushing him to walk again and believing in his recovery. When he started feeling better, he worked with a doctor who weaned him off the powerful painkillers he had been on for months. Every corner seemed to bring a new challenge. But Kenny Stultz is not someone who gives up.

Kenny's life before his illness was hectic and fulfilled. He loved to teach and visit with his students, he played in his church choir, spent time with family and friends, and was active in local groups. He says he always used to burn the candle at both ends "and sometimes try to light the middle, as well." Living in beautiful Lavalette, just south of Huntington, West Virginia, gave him the joy of seeing deep green lawns against a blue Midwestern sky, living among people who care about God, family and country. He moved in with his mother after his father passed away in 1990; and the son who had supported his mother now needed strength of his own. While Kenny was in the hospital, she refused to sleep at home until Kenny came with her. Every night she'd sleep at his bedside, going home only to freshen up and get a change of clothes. "My mom was my rock. She fought for me when I couldn't fight for myself," he says.

And now he was having to fight back to resume his former active life, even as the "experts" were telling him to take the easy way out. "At this point the doctors were trying

to get me to retire. They said, 'We can write you up for disability, you can take early retirement, and nobody would blame you.'" But Kenny refused. Quitting would have been the easy way out, and he still had plenty of life to live.

Music and faith saved Kenny's life. Doctors say his years as a tuba player and singer built up his lung capacity so much that the infection didn't harm him to the extent it would have a non-musician. His drive to get back to his normal life pushed him through days when he was in excruciating pain, frustrated and exhausted. But Kenny fought the battles and did improve, and now he strives to encourage others going through their own trials. He also hopes people will appreciate the little things in their lives. Having had to re-learn everything, including writing his name and walking, he understands not to take anything for granted.

"My physical therapist likes to say, 'You don't know what you've got until it's gone – and you get it back,'" he says. So every morning when he gets out of bed, Kenny thanks God as he starts his day. "It's such an incredible feeling to know that according to three doctors I didn't stand a chance. But God had other plans. I know I have been left here for a reason; I think part of it is to inspire people," he says.

He does that by teaching his students not to give up, and showing them what hard work and perseverance can do. When he went back to the classroom in August of 2002, he was wearing two leg braces and walking with a crutch. Still, he was able to teach choreography to his students through his pain, even leaning on a desk if he needed to in order to show them a particular move. "I can look at those kids and say 'Look if I can do it, you can do it.'"

And he doesn't want America to give up the fight against terrorism, or lose the resolve we felt in the days after 9/11. He tells his story of 9/11 to his sixth graders every year so they'll know the challenges he and the nation faced during that time. He says, "Here we are, seven years after, and a lot of people are ready to quit. To me, never forget. We should be playing those tapes everyday just to remind people."

Kenny's connection with 9/11 became even more personal when he found out a former student of his, a doctor, was on the plane that hit the Pentagon. Kenny, facing his own storm at the same time America was, saw this young man's life cut short. Given Kenny's own brush with death, that was one more lesson for him that every day we have on this earth is a blessing.

Seven years after Kenny Stultz was lying in a hospital bed, not expected to live, he is very much alive, and an ankle brace is the only physical reminder of his illness. Before he got sick, he didn't know the meaning of "rest;" now, he listens to his body and is not ashamed to ask for help. He feels spiritually and emotionally stronger than he did before.

Kenny's father always said he was so smart he should be a doctor. The day Kenny was admitted to the hospital, he was supposed to start school for his doctorate. Those plans had to be put on hold – but they weren't forgotten. Now, after two and a half years of coursework, Kenny has finally begun his residency toward a Doctoral degree in Music Education. "I've always wanted to be a Doctor," he says. "To prove Dad right."

There is no doubt he will succeed, because Kenny is a "genuine" 9/12 man. And when he does, his mother, his family, and all the people whose lives he has touched will be so proud of him – and so will his dad.