

# a giver, not a taker

by john gaal, sr.

My son, John Stefan Gaal, Jr., was a smart, good-looking, strong, funny, and kind person. He was the second oldest of four children who dearly loved his mother (Mary) and siblings (two sisters: Dana and Leah, and one brother: Jake). Mom served as his sounding board, Dana as his compass, Jake as his best friend, and Leah as his partner in practical jokes. To me, he was everything I never was as a young man. John grew-up loving the outdoors and sports. Although winning was fun, he cherished every opportunity to take the field...win or lose...be it baseball, soccer, football, or frof. On and off the field, John truly led by example. He played by the rules, believed in helping the underdog, and, equally important, despised cheaters. One of the main reasons John left SLUH after his sophomore year was to obtain more playing time on the football field. Much to his delight, he was cleared early-on to play football and soccer—in the same season—during his junior and senior years. In John's junior year, his high school boys soccer team finished third in the state. One year later, he scored the only goal of his high school career...the only one that mattered as it sent his team again to the final four. Afterwards, John was honored by being named as a Missouri Second Team All-State Soccer Player.

As a proud papa, I looked forward to watching John and his little brother play soccer and football each and every weekend. Unfortunately, to the best of my knowledge, John sustained four concussions over

the course of those two years in high school. Having played both ways in football and nearly the entire soccer game exposed my son to dangers most parents were not aware of back in 2009.

It appears that John Jr. suffered from traumatic brain injuries (TBI) which we believe lead to anxiety, depression, and eventually him taking his life on



March 24, 2017. Upon his death, we donated his brain to Dr. Ann McKee at Boston University. She is one of the nation's foremost experts on CTE (chronic traumatic encephalopathy). For those of you who have not seen the movie "Concussion" (with Will Smith) I urge you to do so immediately... especially if you have children and/or grandchildren involved in contact sports (i.e., football, soccer, ice hockey, etc.).

My son was a giver. John, Jr. worked with the mentally ill and often served food to the homeless in the Columbia, MO region. He cared dearly about those who did not have the supportive and loving family he was surrounded by. One of his final wishes was to not merely feed the homeless but bring shower

facilities to them. As of the end of May 2017, on every Tuesday from 10a to 3p, the Shower to the People organization has set up their showers outside of St. Vincent de Paul Church (Soulard) in my son's memory.

John Jr. loved to cook with and for his friends and family. He was known for his backyard slip-and-slide parties and often held fire-pit sessions until wee hours of the morning. Although I wish my John Jr. was still physically in my presence, I know that his caring spirit lives on through his family and friends far and wide. As his proud papa, I promise to do my best to honor his legacy by stopping the stigma associated with Mental Illness and Suicide.

Make no mistake, my son was a good boy!!!

