

# A Song for Steven

WRITTEN BY  
BOB DYE

There are children the world does not always know how to embrace—children born with challenges so great that society too often turns away with labels, sideways glances, or quiet pity. For generations, words like “disabled” have been used to define them, as if a diagnosis could capture the fullness of who they are.

But these children—the ones some call “different”—are not less. They are more. More resilient, more honest in their joy, more unfiltered in their love. They teach us to live in the present, to celebrate small victories, and to see beauty in the overlooked corners of life. Worth is not measured in achievements or accolades, but in laughter that fills a room, in smiles that heal the heaviest of hearts, and in presence that transforms everyone it touches.

This is the story of one of those children—my son, Steven. His life was not easy, and neither was ours as a family, but it was

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beautiful. His spirit reshaped our understanding of love, faith, and what it means to belong.

Steven Bradley was born in a small hospital on the Gulf Coast—Lower Alabama, affectionately known as the “Redneck Riviera.” At the time, I was overseeing a development expansion at Riviera Centre in Foley, Alabama, a place made famous by the shrimp boat scenes from *Forrest Gump*. Life was full—work, plans, possibilities—but everything changed the moment Steven arrived.

He was born with Pallister-Killian syndrome, a rare and complex condition. He was legally blind and deaf, had cerebral palsy, severe developmental delays, and a cleft palate. His early years were marked by hospital stays, surgeries, and constant

uncertainty. Each procedure was a battle for comfort, for time, for life itself.

Yet Steven was never defined by his diagnosis. He radiated joy. His laughter—pure, unguarded—could light up the darkest room. His smile was magnetic, and when he was happy, he’d blow raspberries with such delight that even the hardest days became lighter. Steven didn’t just teach us about love; he redefined it. Not the easy kind, but the kind born from sleepless nights and whispered prayers—the love that endures through storms and finds grace in resilience.

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STEVEN BRADLEY DYE

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Then came 2008. The economy collapsed, and with it, my career. They called it a “reduction in force,” but for me, it felt like a door slamming shut. And yet, another opened. A recruiter from Maui called with an offer to manage *The Shops at Wailea*. They called it paradise—but paradise isn’t simple when you have a child like Steven.

Because of his condition, the decision was excruciating. After painful discussion, my wife stayed in Portland with Steven and our younger son, Kenny, while I went alone to Maui. Thus began a six-year odyssey—five weeks on the island, one week home. It was a relentless rhythm of airports, FaceTime calls, and trying to hold our family together across an ocean. Even though he couldn’t speak, I knew Steven felt my absence.

We all carried the weight differently. My wife bore the heaviest load. Kenny grew up between video calls and long airport embraces. And Steven—he just kept smiling, blowing raspberries like love itself could stretch across time zones. Maybe it can.

One afternoon, Steven Tyler—yes, that Steven Tyler—walked into my office. He was taking a break from *American Idol* filming and wanted a quiet place to escape the cameras. We offered him a conference room, and a few hours later, he asked to speak with me. We talked about music, life, and his foundation for

girls who had suffered abuse. Somehow, that led me to share my son’s story.

He listened—really listened. His larger-than-life persona softened, and his eyes grew heavy with understanding. After a long silence, he said softly, “Wow... so you get it.” Then he hugged me, pressed his cheek to mine, and whispered, “Tell Steven I love him.”

Tyler never met my son, but he felt him—through me, through the story. On my next trip home, I placed a photo of me and Tyler on Steven’s nightstand. Sometimes I’d catch Steven lying quietly on his side, staring at that picture, smiling as if he knew.

Years later, when our paths crossed again—at the grand opening of Fleetwood’s in Lahaina—that same connection remained. Tyler remembered. He saw Steven in me, and by doing that, he saw me.

In 2014, Steven became ill. Unlike the dozens of times before, he didn’t recover. I think he was tired—tired in a way that medicine can’t measure. Deep down, he knew his work here was done. He had held our family together through the hardest years, and somehow, with a spirit stronger than anyone imagined, he succeeded.

He passed away while I was on Maui—six hours and a lifetime away. When the call came, something inside me shattered. He took a piece of my heart with him. For a long time, grief consumed me.

But he didn’t leave me empty. His spirit lingered—in the music I played, in the quiet moments that felt too profound to explain. He became the laughter in silence, the whisper in stillness, the comfort in pain. A presence not gone, just unseen.

A few months after his passing, I organized a concert at The Shops featuring Robert Cazimero, Hawaii’s legendary musician and hula master. I invited Diane Haynes Woodburn, publisher of *Maui No Ka ‘Oi* magazine, to join me. As Robert’s music filled the night air, a local *hālau* took

the stage. Midway through a song, a young boy with thick glasses—clearly on the spectrum—ran to the front of the stage.

Robert didn’t miss a beat. He smiled and said, “You go, boy,” motioning him to join the dancers. The boy tried to mimic the hula moves, glancing back at Robert for reassurance. No one stopped him. We all watched, spellbound.

When the song ended, the *hālau* exited, and the boy bowed—first to Robert, then to the audience. And then, out of nowhere, he ran straight to me. He threw his arms around me, pressed his cheek to mine, and whispered, “Thank you.” Then he was gone.

Diane turned to me, eyes wide. “Who was that?” she asked. I shook my head, speechless. She leaned closer and said softly, “I think that was Steven.”

For the first time in months, the crushing weight of grief lifted. Tears filled my eyes, but they weren’t tears of loss. They were tears of understanding—that Steven was still with me. Still watching, still



STEVE TYLER  
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laughing, still blowing raspberries somewhere beyond the veil.

That night, I finally understood what Steven had been teaching me all along: love doesn’t end—it simply changes form. His body was gone, but his presence remained in the small miracles and unexpected moments that remind us we are never truly alone.

*A Song for Steven* isn’t just my son’s story. It’s for every child the world calls “different,” and every parent, sibling, or friend who learns that the ones society deems weaker are often the strongest among us. They are not meant to be hidden. They are meant to be celebrated.