

## Tribute to Donnie Jarrell – July 1, 2005

By Salty Galvis

I met Donnie sometime in the late 80s or early 90s. I'm not sure of the date. Theresa and I joined Franco's Athletic Club in October of 1988, so I could have met him shortly after that. I started doing triathlons in 1991, so I could have met him sometime after that. I remember that I started running into him at the races and then would see him at Franco's after the races, and we started sharing race stories. That's how I first got to know Donnie. Fortunately, as the years passed, I came to know Donnie much more intimately.

We've all recognized and said over and over that in our world of amateur competitive racing on the north shore, Donnie was our spiritual mentor, coach and leader. Donnie inspired us all to be better than we were at whatever athletic task we tackled. In 1998, after many of us tried the Gulf Coast Half-Ironman Triathlon for the first time, and became hooked on the idea of trying an Ironman, Donnie was our inspiration and leader. We knew that with his help, we could accomplish our goal. I've said before that I seriously doubt that many of us could have completed the first Ironman without Donnie's coaching, training, encouragement and inspiration. However, the truth is that Donnie was not just an inspiration in our athletic endeavors, but also an inspiration in our every-day lives.

Although I'm not sure about the year I met Donnie, I'm sure about the fact that knowing Donnie for the last 15 years or so has made me a better person than I would have been had I never met him. Donnie was clearly a special gift from God to the north-shore community, but particularly to Theresa and me. As Theresa and I got to know Donnie first as a coach of the Franco's Fins youth swim team, we'd watch him spend hours at the pool coaching kids of all ages to be better swimmers. I was always impressed with his enthusiasm and joy for coaching the kids, and I benefited from his enthusiasm and joyfulness.

As I became closer to Donnie over the years, I both watched and experienced firsthand his incredibly charitable, optimistic and indomitable spirit. I learned about how his job was teaching physical education to autistic and other special-needs children suffering from sensory-deficit disorders. I realized that his work required endless patience and love, and I came to learn that Donnie had plenty of both, and I benefited from his incredible example.

And when he wasn't working, he was teaching or coaching kids and adults who asked for his help with running, swimming, cycling, and triathlon, and I benefited from it all, as did all the others.

Donnie was always ready to assist anyone who asked for it with advice, training tips, coaching and encouragement, all of which he gave for free, often after having spent his spare time researching specific training criteria tailored to the individuals who requested his assistance. I watched and benefited as he put together training plans for

dozens of people, including Theresa and myself and then tested us on treadmills to find our proper heart-rate training zones.

I participated in Donnie's spin classes and benefited from his cycling workouts and training tips. And then I'd do post-spin-class transition runs and benefit from his running tips.

I participated in Donnie's swimming lessons, which he gave me for free, despite my insistence on paying him, and I benefited from his swimming tips.

I participated in Donnie's early-morning track workouts and became a better runner doing them. From time to time he'd make me lead an interval or two, or three, just to make me a better runner, although I usually complained that he did it just to torture me.

I participated in road trips with Donnie to bike races, foot-races and triathlons, and I watched and occasionally benefited personally, and always spiritually, from his constant readiness to lend a hand with a training or racing tip, or to lend a spare tire tube, or to lend some food or drink to someone else who might need it.

I participated in weekend camping trips with kids and adults that Donnie would organize, and I benefited from the warm friendship and social interaction I had with good folks. Donnie would spend hours with the kids playing and laughing with them and sometimes playing pranks on both the kids and the adults, never in a mean spirited manner, but always in good clean fun. And after his jokes and pranks, he'd laugh until he was doubled over, which made me and others laugh as well. And I benefited from the laughter.

I watched as Donnie courted and married Tonya and then as they had Logan, and I benefited from the example Donnie was as a loving and doting husband and father. And I watched as Donnie and Tonya each made the other a better person.

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In late March of 2003, when we learned that Donnie had received a confirmed diagnosis of ALS, we were stunned at the news. However, we were also galvanized into action, absolutely spurred on without hesitation or acceptable limitation to give back to the man who had always given so much to so many others. And we all benefited from having the opportunity to serve Donnie and Tonya and Logan, as Jesus taught us to do.

And as Donnie's illness progressed, we all watched with sadness, surely, but also with amazement and pride at the strength of his will and his spirit. I don't know how many of you are aware of it but when Donnie received a confirmation of his diagnosis on March 28, 2003, he was given only 6 to 12 months to live by the doctors. But he beat those odds magnificently, and we all benefited from watching his spirit as he did so. I've said many times that I believe that one of God's purposes for Donnie's life on this earth was to show us all how to endure and handle incredible adversity with

grace, courage, determination, dignity and faith. And we've all benefited from the example Donnie set for us the last 27 months.

Donnie received a lot of recognition, not only in the southeast but also nationally, for what he did for so many others. Local press coverage publicized Donnie's situation extensively. Those of us who were in Lake Placid for Ironman USA in 2003 will recall that Mike Reilly allowed Hank Miltenberger to introduce Donnie at the IMUSA post-race awards banquet and recognize him for his contribution to the sport of triathlon, while about 30 of us Team Earthquakers who were there cried our eyes out, and the rest of the audience of 4,000 applauded warmly and heartily. At the annual Louisiana Chapter of the National Multiple Sclerosis Society's 2003 MS Tour for Cure, a two-day, 150 mile charity bike tour in October of 2003, Donnie was again recognized for inspiring some 60 persons from the north shore to participate in the annual fundraiser for the National Multiple Sclerosis Society. In January of 2004, despite the fact that he was unable to continue competing in athletic events beyond the early summer of 2003, Donnie was named the 2003 Louisiana Multisport Athlete of the year by the publisher of the Louisiana Multisport Report, on the basis of his inspirational accomplishments while battling his disease. And in August of 2004 Donnie was featured in *Triathlete* magazine, the national magazine of the sport of triathlon, in an article entitled "A Purposeful Life."

All of these tributes to Donnie were well earned by a man who was simply awesome in everything he undertook with an incredibly positive and optimistic attitude. But I firmly believe that the source of Donnie's awesome personality was divine. I firmly believe that another of God's purposes for Donnie was to make us all better persons by making Donnie the incredible person he was. I've seen that in the spirit of Christian love and giving that we've all witnessed on the part of so many people:

- people such as Tonya and her family, Gaytha and RD, who've been so loving and giving, not only to Donnie but also to all the rest of us who wanted to and needed to intrude on their lives to be with Donnie;
- people such as Donnie's mother, Vernie, his brothers Al and Kevin and Bryan, and his and sisters, Vicki and Terena, who've all loved and cared and fought for Donnie throughout his illness;
- people such as Brad Creel, who's been so magnificent in caring for Donnie and nursing him with Christian love, and Brad's father, who donated Donnie's access van, and Joe Mossy who had the van painted at his expense;
- people such as Ben Hewett, Missy Kujawa, Tony Le Mon, Tony Zelenka, and all the other members of the Team Earthquake Board and The Donnie Jarrell Fund Committee, who've all worked tirelessly and joyously in organizing, promoting and putting on all the fundraisers for Donnie and Tonya and Logan;
- people such as the Friday-morning-at-Franco's Bible Study Gang, Fred Miller, and Shannon Allison, and Dennis Mutell, and Steve Sperier, and Steve Jacobs

and Bill Salaun and all the others, who've prayed regularly for Donnie for the last two years;

- people such as the Tuesday-afternoon-at-Donnie's gang, Shannon Allison and Bill Salaun and Bobbie Lowe and the others, who've done so much to assist Donnie and Tonya and Logan both with their physical needs and spiritual needs, doing whatever needed to be done for Donnie and Tonya around the house and just being there for Donnie;
- people such as Sue "Boo" Boudreaux, Carol Martin, my wife Theresa and others, who've cooked for Donnie and Tonya and Logan, and who've read to Donnie, and who've just been there at times to show their love for Donnie and Tonya and Logan;
- people such as Hank Miltenberger and his assistant Judy Hanneman and others at Gilsbar, who've worked and given tirelessly for Donnie and Tonya and Logan;
- people such as Ron and Sandy Franco and countless members of Franco's Athletic Club, who've given their money, time and facilities to aid in Donnie's cause;
- people such as Aimee Shuey, who, in her love for Donnie, was inspired to suggest that we make the awesome scrapbook we made for Donnie for his 41<sup>st</sup> birthday, and then later suggested and coordinated the trip to Houston with Donnie and Tonya and 60 of their friends on the "Gus Bus" to see Donnie's favorite band, Guster;
- people such as Randy Legeai of the New Orleans Bicycle Club, who for the last two years has generously given of his time and talent to maintain and update Donnie's website, [www.donzaroo.com](http://www.donzaroo.com);
- people such as Bill Burke, Robin Robert, Kelly Nolan and Jay-Jay of Premier Event Management, who've given so much of their time, talent and treasure to help in the production of fundraising events for Donnie and his family;
- people such as massage therapist Mike "Lumberjack" Aldridge, who from the time Donnie was first diagnosed, went to Donnie's home every Thursday at no charge to massage him and ease his muscular aches and pain;
- people such as Coach Andy Thiel and his athletes, Franco's swimmers and others who used to swim for Donnie and Charlie and Beth and who still do, who've all made their own fundraising efforts to show their love for Donnie;
- people such as the countless volunteers who showed up for all the fundraising events to make them work;

- people such as the members of the Four Unplugged and Blue Meanies bands, who gave their time and talent by playing for free at the Donz Soirées to help raise funds for Donnie and Tonya and Logan;
- and even corporate citizens, who after all are just groups of people, such as the north-shore banks, restaurants, printers and other businesses, including the Spokesman Professional Bicycle Works, Legends Sports World, Doctor's Chiropractic, Mossy Motors, Gilsbar, Northlake Dental and others....

The list just goes on and on. It's all been truly an example of God's wondrous works and how He's used Donnie as an instrument to show His Glory through a man whom all could love and look up to and respect and admire and want to emulate, all to our benefit and to the Glory of God.

And now, after having been a shining beacon of light to all of us who've had the joy, honor and privilege to know and love Donnie for any part of his 42 years on this earth, after having beaten the odds and won many battles in his fight against ALS for 27 months, Donnie has earned his place with God in Heaven. God has taken him home, and we'll miss him mightily until the time when we can all be with him again. And although I weep for Tonya and Logan, and for myself, due to Donnie's passing from this life to eternal life, I don't despair, and I urge all of you not to despair. As a Christian, I believe firmly in the resurrection that Jesus promised all those who know and accept Him as the Way, the Truth and the Life. I'd like to read one passage of Scripture to you that I think is appropriate at this point. It's from Paul's second letter to the Corinthians, and the reference is chapter 4, verse 7 through chapter 5, verse 1:

### **2 Corinthians 4:7-5:1**

**7** But we hold this treasure in earthen vessels, that the surpassing power may be of God and not from us.

**8** We are afflicted in every way, but not constrained; perplexed, but not driven to despair;

**9** persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed;

**10** always carrying about in the body the dying of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our body.

**11** For we who live are constantly being given up to death for the sake of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may be manifested in our mortal flesh.

**12** So death is at work in us, but life in you.

**13** Since, then, we have the same spirit of faith, according to what is written, "I believed, therefore I spoke," we too believe and therefore speak,

**14** knowing that the one who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus and place us with you in his presence.

**15** Everything indeed is for you, so that the grace bestowed in abundance on more and more people may cause the thanksgiving to overflow for the glory of God.

**16** Therefore, we are not discouraged; rather, although our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day.

**17** For this momentary light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison,

**18** as we look not to what is seen but to what is unseen; for what is seen is transitory, but what is unseen is eternal.

**1** For we know that if our earthly dwelling, a tent, should be destroyed, we have a building from God, a dwelling not made with hands, eternal in heaven.

I have a feeling that if Donnie were here with us today, he'd tell us that we don't HAVE to grieve and miss him, we GET to do so. While ALS may have destroyed Donnie's earthly tent, and taken him from us in this life, I'm comforted by the knowledge of God's Word that he now has an eternal Heavenly dwelling place, made by God, and I look forward with impatience to the day when I can join him there with my God as well.