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Injected with HIV by dad as baby, teen inspires

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Bryan Jackson lifts his 5-year-old sister Shannyn Jackson over his head as they play Thursday, June 4, 2009, in St. Charles, Mo. As a baby, Brryan's father secretly injected him with a syringe of HIV-tainted blood in hopes of killing the child, but on Saturday, the now-18-year-old will graduate high school, and is stepping up his public speaking about fighting the stigma of AIDS and the power of faith and forgiveness. (AP Photo/Jeff Roberson)

ST. CHARLES, Mo. (AP) - Brryan Jackson has been left out of birthday party invitations and asked not to use water fountains. His daily routine at one point included 23 pills, three IV medications and two injections. But the toughest part of growing up with AIDS for him may be knowing how he got it.

When he was a baby, his father entered his hospital room and injected a syringe of HIV-tainted blood into his tiny body. At times during his childhood, he was expected to die.

Now 18, he'll put on his black cap and gown Saturday and graduate from Francis Howell North High School in St. Charles, near St. Louis. Shielded

from the public for much of his life since his father's high-profile criminal trial a decade ago, Brryan is now an outspoken advocate for people with AIDS, and the power of faith and forgiveness.

"I expect to break the barriers between what people think this virus is, and what it really is," Brryan said Thursday during an interview at his home. "I hope to eliminate a lot of ignorance and change people's minds."

Then he breaks into a few lines from a Lazlo Bane song: "I can't do it all on my own; I'm no Superman."

Brryan's mother, Jennifer Jackson, and his father, Brian Stewart, were together for about two years, off and on, in the early 1990s. After Jackson became pregnant and had the child, Stewart denied he was the father. Paternity tests proved he was.

In 1992, Brryan was 11 months old when he was hospitalized with asthma. After leaving the hospital, he was constantly sick. Doctors ruled out one illness after another.

Finally, in 1996, the child was near death when he was diagnosed with AIDS. But doctors were puzzled about how he got the disease. He wasn't born with it, and had not had blood transfusions. That's when suspicion turned to Stewart.

Stewart worked at a St. Louis hospital as a phlebotomist - his job was drawing blood from patients. Brryan's mother said Stewart came to Brryan's hospital room during that 1992 stay and suggested she go get a bite to eat.

Prosecutors said he had a syringe filled with HIV-tainted blood tucked inside his lab coat. They said he waited until he was alone with the boy and injected him.

There were no witnesses, but at trial in 1998, Jackson and others testified that Stewart had access to tainted blood and previously had threatened to use it as a weapon.

The defense contended the boy could have been infected other ways, perhaps from a medical procedure. But prosecutors argued that Stewart wanted the family out of his life, and didn't want to pay child support.

"Obviously, the first thing is, what a horrible thing to do to a person. And then, how do you do that to your own child?" said Ross Buehler, the former St. Charles County prosecutor who handled the case.

Stewart was convicted of first-degree assault and received the maximum sentence, life in prison. At sentencing, Judge Ellsworth Cundiff said he was in the same category as "the worst war criminal" and added, "I believe when God finally calls you, you are going to burn in hell from here to eternity."

To distance himself from his father - and to protect his identity growing up - Brryan changed his name from "Brian." He has not been in contact with Stewart but said he has forgiven him.

"God wants us to forgive people," he said. "Am I going to make myself as low as he is? ... I've got to be the better person."

Stewart, now 42, remains in a Missouri prison and is eligible for parole in two years. He declined to be interviewed for this story and said he did not wish to have an attorney comment on his behalf.

Buehler said he occasionally talks to Jennifer Jackson and called Brryan courageous for his AIDS education work. "He's a remarkable kid," Buehler said.

In many ways, Brryan is a typical teen. He became a cheerleader after his sister dared him to try out for the squad; he's learning how to play the guitar.

With improvements in AIDS treatment, he's down to just five medications these days. He said at his last doctor's visit, they didn't draw blood because he has overall been in good health.

Still, he has missed long stretches of school battling AIDS and admits that some days, it's hard to get out of bed.

Friends say Brryan is known for talking animatedly with his hands and making people laugh. And he's fiercely loyal.

Kendra Sontag, 16, said if she has a bad day, Brryan will often show up at her door to make sure she's all right. His sunny outlook has made her a stronger person, Sontag said.

"He could be mad forever but he chooses to forgive, because that's what God would do," she said.

Brryan's also quite a flirt.

"He likes to hit on the ladies, I'm afraid," Sontag said.

That's where the stigma of his disease can crop up. Sontag said at least one girl has been told to stop talking to Brryan by parents worried about their daughter's involvement with a boy with AIDS.

As always, Brryan moves ahead. He plans to eventually go to college, and hopes one day to go into politics, but for the upcoming months, he'll spend his time advocating for others with AIDS.

Brryan has started a nonprofit called Hope Is Vital. He will work this summer with Project Kindle, a Valencia, Calif.-based organization that sponsors summer camps for children affected by the disease. He also serves as a speaker with that group and a St. Peters, Mo.-based ministry, Upward Bound Ministries.

Project Kindle's founder, Eva Payne, said when Brryan first started attending Camp Kindle seven years ago, he was shy and frequently cried.

"Every year, he was a little more confident," she said. And when another girl broke down a few years ago, because she was having trouble talking about being HIV-positive, Brryan offered his support.

"He said he can be her voice, until she's ready," Payne recalled.

Project Kindle: <http://www.projectkindle.org/>

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