

Young Joe was defined by his smile, not his illness

His nickname, 'YJK,' stood for Young Joe Kenney, a beloved brother, ringleader, and copilot

By [Thomas Farragher](#) Globe Columnist, Updated July 28, 2020, 6:47 p.m.



Patty and Chris Kenney, parents of Joe Kenney, who died in October, walked the field at Camp Joslin. The family honored his memory by having the camp painted, including a replica of Fenway Park's Green Monster, complete with Citgo sign. DAVID L. RYAN/GLOBE STAFF

OXFORD — He was the boy from central casting, the impossibly cute little kid who

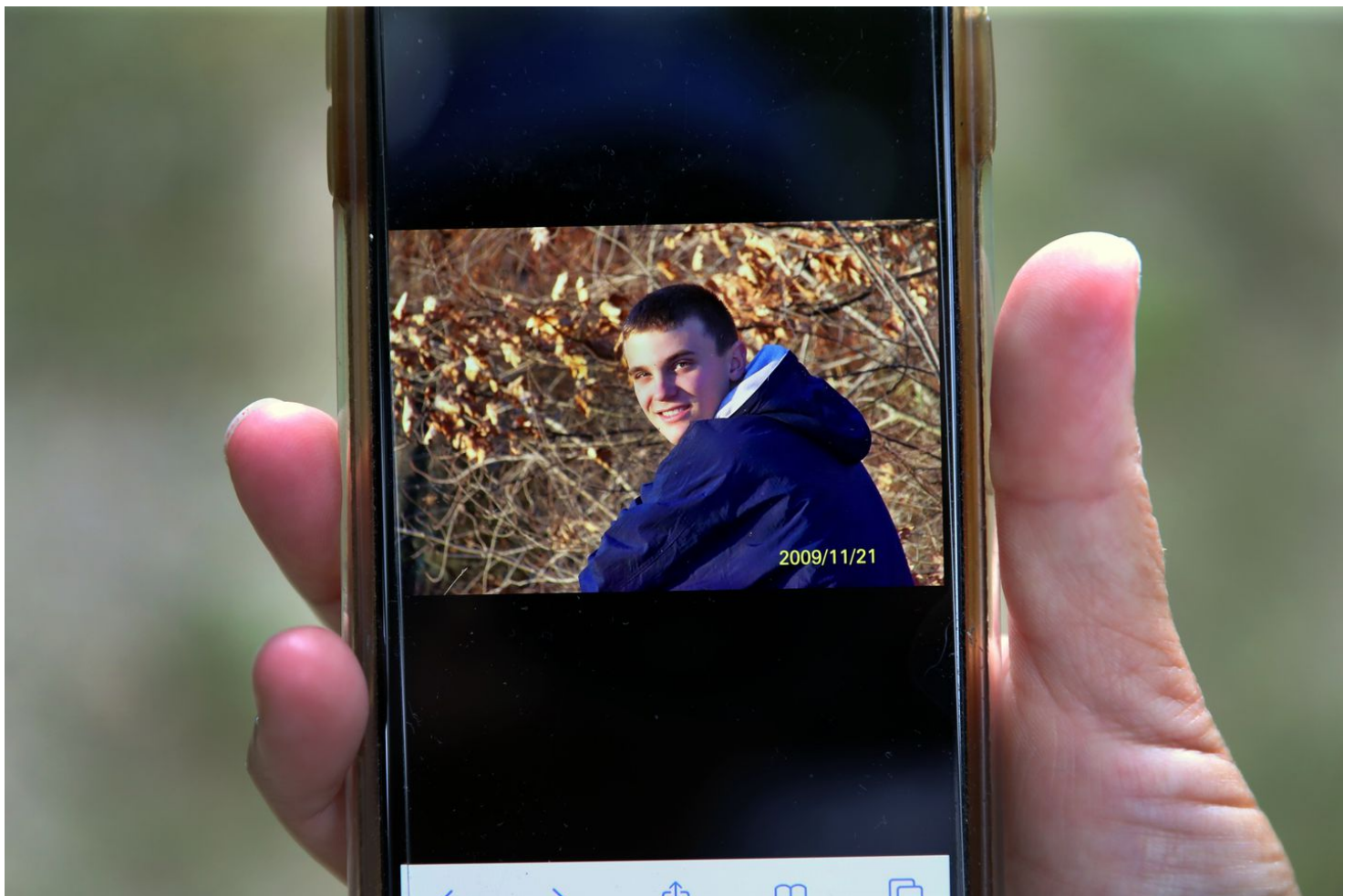
climbed trees, jumped off roofs, wore cowboy boots, and was at the center of a large group of friends who simply adored him.

And as Joe Kenney grew into adolescence and then young adulthood, he never lost his zest for life, wearing a wide smile and acquiring an appreciation for a kaleidoscopic sunset or the grandeur of a full moon rising over a tranquil New England lake.

That perpetual smile and his youthful enthusiasm earned him a nickname that stuck: Young Joe Kenney.

“He was the ringleader with all the kids,” his mother, Patty Kenney, told me the other day.

“He was easy,” his father, Chris Kenney, agreed.



A photograph of Joe Kenney, held by his mother, Patty Kenney. DAVID L. RYAN/GLOBE STAFF

And now, as they mourn the loss of their beloved son, who died last fall at age 24 from diabetic ketoacidosis, staggering his family and his large circle of friends, they have found a place here where Young Joe Kenney's memory will live on. A place where he will be forever young.

It is here at Camp Joslin, part of the Barton Center for Diabetes Education, where kids like Joe Kenney can paddle a canoe, climb a wall, ride a horse, or dance with a girl from an affiliated neighboring camp.

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A place where, if briefly, diabetes can fade into the woods by the lake. Here, at the camp, Joe Kenney's family, friends, co-workers, and colleagues went to work earlier this month to help transform the place that transformed Joe.

More later about the place that helped shape Joe Kenney's young life. But first, the story of the steps that led to here.

Chris and Patty Kenney were sweethearts at Lexington High School, from which they graduated in 1983. He was the captain of the football team. She was the head cheerleader.

“The couple everyone likes to hate,” Patty said behind a smile.

Chris went to the College of the Holy Cross in Worcester, and Patty to Endicott College in Beverly and — when they were both 25 — they married.

Their first child was Alli, their only girl, who was followed in short order by three boys, the oldest of whom was Joe. He would become Alli’s best friend and her copilot in adventure. They would later live a mile apart in South Boston.

“I’d call them up and say, ‘You want to come for dinner?’ “ Patty recalled. “And Alli would be, ‘Ah, I don’t know.’ And Joe would say, ‘OK, I’ll pick you up. Let’s go.’ “

It’s one vignette about a life lived with passion and purpose, a life that was forever changed when Joe was just 7, the age his parents began to notice he was losing weight, urinating frequently, always thirsty.

“Classic symptoms,” Patty said, recalling the moment a doctor issued a blunt and stunning diagnosis.

“He says to Joe, ‘Kid, you’ve got diabetes,’ “ Chris Kenney said. “He said, ‘Your life will never be the same. You’re going to have to learn to be disciplined and take care of yourself.’ “

It was the day before his 8th birthday and the family’s planned birthday celebration was put on hold. So were other things. The family’s life would change. Patty earned her unofficial PhD in diabetes.

But Joe and his family were determined that diabetes would not take over his life. He

would learn to live with the disease. But he would live.

“He would just go with the flow,” his father said. “He was just a happy-go-lucky kid.”

And that’s the kind of kid who showed up at the camp after learning about it from a neighbor, also a diabetic, who worked here as a counselor and preached the gospel of Camp Joslin.

“He was a counselor and he told Joe, ‘You’ve got to come,’ ” Patty Kenney said. “We were really hesitant about it because we said we don’t want Joe to be the diabetic boy. We want Joe to be the boy who happens to have diabetes.”

“This place really was transformative for him,” said Chris Kenney. “He thought he was going to be that kid in class who was insecure, who had no confidence, and had no friends. Instead, he came here and found his best self.”

There was a medical staff at the ready. There were friends in every cabin. Hiking trails and athletic fields. Adventure around every corner. It was a magical place. A place Young Joe Kenney spent three summers as a camper.

He learned to live with diabetes. When he was a football tight end in high school, he’d pop sugar tabs on the field to keep his blood sugar regulated. “He didn’t ever want to bug anybody with it,” his father said.

He was an outdoors guy. He loved the mountains. He studied environmental science at the University of Colorado Boulder.

When he graduated from college at age 22 he had an announcement that thrilled his family: He would join the W.T. Kenney Co. in Arlington, the painting operation founded by his great-grandfather.

“I was proud,” his father said. “I was overjoyed because my grandfather started it.”

Joe Kenney took to his new career as a project manager with uncommon vigor. He swept out the trucks. He tossed out old paint. He set up the ladders and the staging. He bid on jobs. He ran crews.

“Joe would never have done well at a job where he had to wear a shirt and a tie,” his mother said. “He would not be an office guy.”

Last fall, his blood-sugar numbers began to rise. His mother implored him to be more diligent about it.

She and Chris were in New Orleans for a school event for another one of their sons. Joe stayed home, watching the family dogs, and, later, complained about an illness he believed to be food poisoning. But wasn't.

Mother and son exchanged text messages until Joe's return texts suddenly stopped.

What happened next is every parent's worst nightmare. A neighbor was asked to check on Joe. His car was outside, but he did not respond when his name was called.

And then the chief of police was on the phone. “I'm so sorry,” he said. “He's gone.”

More than 2,000 people attended services for Joe Kenney. Some waited hours in the rain to pay their respects to Joe, his parents, and to his siblings, Alli and brothers Mikey and Cal.

His life and his legacy inspired the work in Joe's memory here at a camp now sadly closed because of the pandemic.



The replica of Fenway's Green Monster. DAVID L. RYAN/GLOBE STAFF

Paint was donated. So was a boom crane to reach high places. The work stretched on for weeks.

“They even created a replica of the Green Monster at Fenway Park, complete with a Citgo sign,” said Patrice Kenney Clifford, Joe’s aunt.

His family, still grieving, is comforted by note like this one from a young woman who met Joe at the camp here in the summer of 2007, months after she was diagnosed with diabetes.

“I was bullied terribly in middle school and many of the boys would pick on me because of my recent diagnosis,” she wrote to Patty, who shared the note with me.

“Before going to camp, my self-confidence was at an all-time low and I didn’t think any boys would ever like me because of diabetes. When I met Joe, I instantly had a crush on him and we held hands at the dance! (It) seems silly now but he told me diabetes would never be a reason why someone wouldn’t like me.”

A sweet note about a sweet young man. The smiling guy who is forever Young Joe Kenney.



At Camp Joslin in Charlton a bolder was sandblasted with the letters YJK, in memory of Young Joe Kenney. DAVID L. RYAN/GLOBE STAFF

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