



“It takes a person of great heart to see the wisdom the elders have to offer, and so serve them out of gratitude for the life they have passed on to us.”

– Ken Nerburn

Written by Denise Taylor, SJH Volunteer

As I sit at my computer to write about the unique friendship shared by sixty-three year old Clifton Sumage and twenty-two year old Jason Graffagnino, I find myself afflicted with great trepidation and conflict. I feel an immense obligation to articulate their extraordinary story in a way that enables the reader to achieve a clear and intimate depiction of the two main characters. I fear I will be incapable of attaining the words necessary to adequately convey the remarkable connection that I was honored to observe between this seemingly unlikely pair. My aspiration is that the reader will be able to perceive, through my words, the extraordinary devotion that my heart and eyes witnessed on a muggy spring day in southern Louisiana. Most notably, an unanticipated gift ... the indispensable lesson now instilled in me that I will cleave to throughout the rest of my journey here on Earth. For these two men taught me about the value of friendship and the essential need we all have, as humans, for social connection and that sometimes those connections come from the most dubious of circumstance, when we least expect them. This connection, I believe, is yearned for now more than ever, as we are amidst a time of technological evolution, subsisting in a culture that discourages rather than encourages face to face interaction as we find ourselves relying more and more on modern technology and alas, allowing it to take the place of the investment that is imperative for any healthy relation between two people. I feel, as a culture, we seem to be losing sight of the critical elements necessary for long-term and healthy relationships which must be comprised of nurturing and giving of ourselves in the most charitable way imaginable ... by giving our time. Whether it is comprised of a heart-to-heart over coffee, a shared meal or walking talking ... humbly being present and for one another.

The distressing part of the way we connect in our day is the reality that sometimes the elderly do not have the means to keep up with today's precipitously changing, high-tech modes of communication, they may feel left out of the social circle.

When two improbable paths intersect, such as Jason and Mr. Clifton's, it is difficult to believe anything other than the fact that God's hand is the navigating force.

Upon arrival, I was welcomed by nothing less than the old fashioned Southern hospitality that I have grown accustomed to after residing in Baton Rouge for the last seven years. As I pulled into the driveway of Mr. Clifton's residence I was eagerly greeted by two casually waving hands, one from a wheel chair, and the other from a gently swaying, ubiquitous wooden rocker.

I soon discovered that this enthusiastic reception was not reserved for just me, but rather given liberally by Mr. Clifton, as not a vehicle, bicycle or pedestrian passed without being the recipient of same said greeting.

Succeeding casual introductions, I joined them as I sat on a vacant rocker and settled in for what would seem the quickest three hours of my life. Jason began by explaining to me how he happened upon one of the most remarkable friendships of his lifetime to date. A rapport that is, as Jason explains, *“Non-judgemental, unlike the friendships I experienced growing up in military school or any of the fraternity friends I made.”*

Jason Graffagnino grew up in New Orleans, deriving from an austere Catholic upbringing, military school, et al. At first appearance, Jason seems younger than his twenty two years, yet after just a few minutes of conversation, indication of an *“old soul”*, prolific in wisdom and worldliness, becomes evident in the eyes seemingly shrouded by the glasses he begrudgingly tolerates after an ineffective LASIK surgery.

Mr. Clifton, an African American man, was raised in Baton Rouge and still adheres closely to his Baptist upbringing. Despite suffering from emphysema and stroke-induced right side paralysis, he oozes old-school Southern charm, which I suspect has long been a fundamental component of his character. He is now confined to a wheel chair, a minor inconvenience which has demonstrated impossible to restrain his *“larger than life”* personality. In spite of the untimely passing of both his wife and son due to illness and tragic accident, he continues to find solace in the Bible and enjoys sharing the Word with any ear prepared to listen.

Their acquaintance commenced as a St. Joseph hospice patient assignment for Jason as he was attending his sophomore year in college. Now, two years later, with volunteer hours long ago implemented, Jason maintains his weekly visits with Mr. Clifton. When asked why he opts to continue devoting an afternoon a week with former patient-turned-friend, Jason concedes, *“My weekly*

visits have developed into nothing other than time spent with an old friend.” Displaying an earnest widespread grin, Mr. Clifton intuitively nods in agreement, as he exclaims, “*Yes, Indeed!*”

It was two years ago Father’s Day that the two orchestrated their initial introduction. Jason, devoid of the knowledge that Mr. Clifton had unexpectedly lost his twenty-five year old son, brought along with him a board game and a father’s Day card. “*At first, I thought I had just stepped on a landmine; however, he opened up to me that day,*” says Jason. They both reflect back on that initial visit as if it had taken place just yesterday.

As Jason’s afternoon stay was nearing an end and dusk crept in to embrace the southern sky, Jason started his good-byes and turned to set out for his car, after a few steps, he hesitated, turning back to ask Mr. Clifton if there was anything he would like for him to bring him the following week. Mr. Clifton told Jason he would love nothing more than those “*chalky candies*”. It just so happened, Jason’s dad had given him a bag of the same candies just a few days prior, Jason snatched them from his car and presented them to Mr. Clifton. If these two men hadn’t been assured already, they were now both confident that a divine authority was responsible for orchestrating this newfound comradeship. “*After only one visit*”, Mr. Clifton muses, “*a friendship and a bond developed.*” As I observed these two men together; Jason making certain at all times that Mr. Clifton was comfortable in his chair or that the sun wasn’t shining directly on him. Mr. Clifton, replete with a benevolent glimmer in his eye, listening attentively and with compassion as Jason addressed some of the struggles he has encountered concerning his education or as he recollected an amusing occurrence that they shared over the last couple of years. It became increasingly evident that this relationship was undeniably developed on a foundation of shared reverence and admiration.

Before me sat two vastly diverse men, divided by age, race, religion and lifestyle, they had nothing in common, yet they had everything in common ... the “*everything*” being the shared interest and compassion for their fellow man ... love is the common thread that keeps this friendship alive and connected.

After we rocked and chatted a while, I was advised it was time for their weekly stroll about the neighborhood. As I arose to collect my belongings and say my “*good-byes*”, the two of them, in unison, enthusiastically requested that I join them. I eagerly accepted the invite. As we ambled along, the banter resumed as Mr. Clifton shared with me about Shirley (*now deceased*) his wife of thirty four years; the woman that was his soul mate

and remains, to this day, the love of his life. I asked him what he believed to be the secret to their long and favorable marriage, “*Become one, communicate and be sure to read the Bible together.*” Mr. Clifton then went on to speak of the son he lost at such an early age in a tragic accident.

I turned my eyes from Mr. Clifton’s seasoned yet spirited face and set my attention on Jason, amazed, as I observe him almost effortlessly maneuver Mr. Clifton in his wheelchair along the winding, uneven roads (*a faculty, no doubt, he acquired by working in a hospital as a patient transporter*). Jason met my gaze, “*Mr. Clifton has every right to be bitter about the cards he was dealt, yet he always has faith and a good sense of humor.*”

We continue on for a while working our way back to Mr. Clifton’s home, with only the crunching sound of the gravel beneath the wheels of the rolling chair to infuse our ears.

In today’s swift paced world of immediate gratification, as we frequently hide behind social networks where we chat in “*real time*” with sometimes “*not-so-real people*”, it is inspirational and quite comforting to know that each Friday afternoon, Mr. Clifton can be found gazing out his window anticipating a visit from his young comrade, Jason. These two men will savor a few hours of perhaps a board game, a movie or an episode of Jeopardy while indulging in pizza or a home-cooked meal sent by Jason’s mother. To conclude each visit, Jason and Mr. Clifton will relish in an unhurried stroll about the neighborhood, embraced by the duski-ness of the afternoon, which may perhaps lead to discussion of LSU sports, family, school, health concerns, a neighbor’s unkempt yard, flowers that are in bloom and now and again the stroll will consist of nothing more than a sequence of long, comfortable silences.

“*I believe my friendship with Mr. Clifton pulled me through some horrible times I was going through in school. He has taught me to overcome life’s obstacles with a little bit of humor and perseverance,*” Jason reflects. Mr. Clifton listens carefully to Jason’s words as a thoughtful, proud grin gradually emerges across his face. It seems this friendship is impeccably balanced. “*I am so grateful that God brought Jason into my life, and I am also grateful for his parents that brought him into this world.*”

