

STORIES OF HOPE

A CHAMPION FOR AWARENESS



KEN KOTCH PHOTOGRAPHY

Noah Brokmeier, the Diabetes Dude, with his trademark blue flamingo at *The Today Show*

Noah Brokmeier of Taunton, Mass., was a first-grader in 2007 when he was diagnosed with type 1 diabetes and moments later learned about broken dreams.

"Does this mean I can't be an Army man?" he asked. After his parents, Tim and Tracy Brokmeier, explained that the U.S. military does not accept recruits with type 1 diabetes, Noah cried over losing his chance to someday prove his patriotism.

Two years later, Noah was reluctant to tell others about his diabetes and tested his blood glucose in private in the school nurse's office. Then a visitor came to school to tell the kids about diabetes. When describing the need for insulin, finger pokes and snacks, he repeatedly referred to Noah as "the diabetes dude."

Noah arrived home that day with an announcement: "I'm not embarrassed about having diabetes anymore. I want to be known as The Diabetes Dude so more people will understand it." He had found a new dream in bringing diabetes awareness to America.

His parents set up a website, TheDiabetesDude.com, mainly to update the extended family across the country. But Noah soon wanted to reach more people. When trying to raise money for the Association's Step Out: Walk to Stop Diabetes, his parents suggested putting a pink flamingo on someone's lawn to draw attention to their request for a donation.

"No, I want them to be blue for diabetes awareness," Noah said. His parents bought 25 flamingos, and Noah planted them at the homes of friends along with information on what he goes through to manage his diabetes. Within two weeks he

had raised \$2,000 and hatched a national campaign.

"People started calling and asking us to send a flamingo to a relative in another state," recalls Tracy Brokmeier. "We got requests from all over the place."

Demand continued after the walk, so Noah made blue flamingos his trademark for diabetes awareness and set a goal.

"I'm going to reach all 50 states by the end of the year," Noah declared. A flamingo shipped to Alaska, the final state, a few days after Christmas. They've also reached Canada, Singapore and Australia.

The family has bought 500 blue flamingos, each one named by Noah, and paid to ship them anywhere, knowing that few will return home. Noah asks that the flamingo be passed on to another family affected by diabetes. He also asks for an action photo of the recipient with the bird to show that people with diabetes can do what they want in life. More than 300 photos of energetic kids with diabetes and a blue bystander appear on the Facebook page for The Diabetes Dude.

Noah also started an ambassador program, selecting 44 kids throughout the U.S. and Canada to champion diabetes awareness in their own communities.

Suddenly, Noah was a 9-year-old celebrity with a staff of family members. He shares his thoughts on Twitter and Facebook. His dad handles media interviews. His mom maintains the website and replies to e-mails after getting input from Noah. His sister, Dana, 12, shares the spotlight when she transforms into 7-foot Danie the Dancing Diabetes Flamingo and teaches kids a line dance. His brother, Koda, 5, passes out blue flamingo-shaped wristbands. His oldest sibling, Leah, 19, pitches in when home from college.

This past summer, the family packed up for a month-long road tour, stopping at Association Diabetes Camps and other diabetes events.

"He really doesn't grasp how many people he has affected," Tracy Brokmeier says. "People come up and talk to him and are inspired by him. He says he's just talking with his friends."

As his duty to country, Noah helps other people understand what it means to have diabetes and encourages kids with diabetes to lead a normal, active life.

"He does what he does for other kids living with diabetes," his mom says. "This is his way of giving back." ▲

"I'm not embarrassed about having diabetes anymore."

