

# STORIES OF HOPE

## Touching Hearts at Age 12

If you attend an American Diabetes Association event in the Chicago area and 12-year-old Jeffrey Linnert goes to the microphone, you better pull out the Kleenex.

Tears tend to flow when Jeffrey tells the story of his life with type 1 diabetes – not out of sadness, but because he is a living portrait of courage, compassion and hope.

“I tell people, ‘Here’s a real-life story of a kid who has diabetes.’ I talk about the finger pokes and how there’s no cure for me yet,” explains Jeffrey, Orland Park, Ill. “And how Diabetes Camp is the only place where I can go and feel normal. And then I say, ‘Now let’s all support each other and find a cure for diabetes.’”

His dad developed type 2 diabetes two years ago, giving Jeffrey added incentive to advocate for diabetes research. “He’s watching what he eats,” says Jeffrey, a son experienced at diabetes management. “I think he could test his blood sugar a little more, just because I love him.”

The director of an Association Diabetes Camp first asked Jeffrey to say a few words after noticing the young camper’s healthy outlook on diabetes. Additional requests put Jeffrey in front of larger crowds at Step Out: Walk to Stop Diabetes and other Association events. He’s eager to help rally support, although he’d rather his positive message didn’t unleash tears.

“It’s a great feeling,” he says of the impact he has on listeners, “but sometimes it’s hard to look out and see people crying.”

Jeffrey, who developed diabetes at age 2, can’t remember life without diabetes.

*“Diabetes Camp is the only place where I can go and feel normal.”*

“The diagnosis was a major, life-altering event,” says his mother, Stacey Linnert. “We thought we had it all – the house, the dog and this wonderful, healthy baby. And the next day you’re afraid that your child will develop long-term complications.”

Stacey and Jeff Linnert struggled with finger pricks and insulin injections, having to cause their son pain to keep him healthy. “It’s heartbreaking for a parent,” Stacey says, “but you learn to become your child’s biggest advocate.”

Because his blood glucose is unpredictable, going high after exercise or low after a big meal, Jeffrey gets 10 to 12 finger pricks a day to test his blood glucose. Stacey and Jeff set the alarm to check Jeffrey’s blood glucose two or three times every night.

When Jeffrey attended Diabetes Day Camp as a 4-year-old, his first time away from family, his parents realized that



Jeffrey Linnert

a diabetic coma or seizure could take away their only child.

“What if something happens today, and I never get to tell him I love him?” Stacey recalls asking herself. “Now we make sure we tell him that every night.”

Once Jeffrey became an unofficial spokesman, his parents started hearing comments about Jeffrey being an inspiration and a role model for other youngsters with diabetes.

“Even though we’re saddened that our child has this horrible disease, Jeffrey has made us nothing but proud every day,” Stacey says. “ADA has given Jeffrey opportunities to shine like a star. He makes us stronger every day by showing he can do this.”

Jeffrey’s knack for connecting with an audience prompted the Association to name him 2010 Co-Youth Ambassador for Northern Illinois, which meant more appearances asking the public, business leaders and legislators to support the search for a cure. As a member of the Association’s local Youth Action Council, Jeffrey has found yet another chance to “touch a lot of hearts” with a few words.

“Yeah, there’s pressure. It’s good pressure, though,” Jeffrey says.

Last year, Jeffrey was too old for day camp, so the Association asked him to be a junior counselor for younger children with diabetes.

“It’s a big responsibility and a ball of fun,” Jeffrey says. “If little kids have diabetes, I can show them they’re not alone. At camp, they can find a great friend who’s older to help with their diabetes, and that’s me.” ▲

*Find an Association Diabetes Camp at [diabetes.org/camp](http://diabetes.org/camp).*