

From the University of Mississippi Medical Center Division of Public Affairs

BROTHER'S COURAGE INSPIRES UMMC SENIOR DENTISTRY STUDENT

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JACKSON, Miss. – The news about his brother was like a punch in the gut to John Wikle.

Growing up in Tupelo, John always looked up to Ned, six years his senior. He had even followed in Ned's academic footsteps to the School of Dentistry at the University of Mississippi Medical Center.

Ned, 34, had received his D.M.D. from UMMC in 2008 and entered the Navy, which took him to San Diego, California, for one year and Japan for three. He returned to the U.S. in 2012 to begin an endodontics residency at the University of Alabama at Birmingham.

Already a father of two and a short semester away from completing his residency, Ned and his wife were expecting their third child when Ned began to develop a chronic cough. A non-smoker, Ned dismissed the symptom for months, until he started to cough up blood.

Medical tests during the Christmas holidays confirmed his family's greatest fear: Ned was diagnosed with Stage 4 non-small cell carcinoma of the lungs.

"It was tough – it was a real shock," said John, a senior dentistry student. "We could kind of see it coming, that something bad was going on. You just hope there is some other explanation besides cancer.

"I guess you just don't really believe it until a doctor diagnoses it."

Yet almost from the moment the diagnosis was discovered, Ned had mitigated it by his faith.

"He's a real strong Christian, so he believes there will be a purpose to it in his life," John said. "It's kind of changed the way he looks at things.

"It's part of God's plan."

It's a belief that has shaped Ned's decision to complete his residency training at UAB, despite whatever obstacles his health may bring. And it's an attitude that has endeared Ned to his colleagues and faculty.

A couple of months after Ned's diagnosis, A. J. Fennell, a student in the UAB School of Dentistry, took a panoramic photo of downtown Birmingham after a rare snowstorm. Fennell shared the photo online, and it quickly began to spread on social media. Fennell used the photo to develop an online campaign to help the Wikle family with expenses associated with Ned's treatment.

"His is just one case out of many people out there who need help with the expensive cancer treatments," John said, "but the response has been amazing. There have been so many people that have been so supportive. People who get to know him see that he's a really great guy.

"I think people see that he has a real situation, that he has a real need to provide for his family."

In fewer than three months, the Downtown Birmingham Snow Picture for a Cause, a fundly.com site that features the photo and a video about Ned, already has surpassed its support goal of more than \$50,000.

The level of response comes as no surprise to Dr. Gary Reeves, dean of the School of Dentistry at UMMC, who knows the Wikle family well.

"Ned and John are great examples of dentists we want in our profession," Reeves said. "They are talented, caring and compassionate. They have a strong love for each other, their families and their patients."

The diagnosis has had an impact on Ned's career trajectory, however. He initially had designs on entering private practice; now, he is considering opportunities with the Schools of Dentistry at UAB or back here at UMMC.

John's post-graduation plans haven't changed, but now they may overlap with his older brother's: John is set to begin a yearlong advanced education in general dentistry residency at the Foundry near Birmingham.

"That would be great, just to get to see him more, try to encourage him and be there for him," John said. "I try to call and check in on him. There is not too much I can do for him right now. We're praying for him and we're just trying to be there for him.

"We're staying hopeful that he'll be able to get through it and he'll have a complete recovery."

John acknowledges that there are a lot of people walking in his brother's footsteps, which makes the support Ned has received so special to their family.

"People know what cancer is. It's tough," John said. "It makes you realize that anything can happen in life."

For more information or to make a donation to support Ned Wikle and his family, visit <https://fundly.com/downtown-birmingham-snow-picture-for-a-cause>.

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