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Childhood cancer shaped his work and outlook on life

BY LAUREN HENSLEY  
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NNB Student Reporter

ST. PETERSBURG
– When he was 5, Jake Pfeifer got a grim diagnosis. He had a malignant, inoperable tumor behind his left eye.

Doctors told his parents he had a 5 percent chance of surviving the next three years.

“The cancer was a very rare childhood malignancy and the prognosis for that particular cancer was very, very poor,” said his mother, Sonya Pfeifer. “We made funeral arrangements for Jake three times.”

Her son underwent aggressive radiation and chemotherapy treatments and spent much of his childhood in the hospital. But he beat the odds. He was pronounced cancer free when he was 15, although he still has side effects from the treatment.

Now 27, Pfeifer is a glass artist with a keen appreciation of life and a remarkable portfolio. He has studied under several renowned glass masters and his work has appeared in galleries across the country.

He spent May as an artist-in-residence at the Duncan McClellan Gallery at 2342 Emerson Ave. S in St. Petersburg’s Warehouse Arts District. His exhibit will be on display there through July 6 and then become part of the gallery’s general collection.

His childhood illness shaped his outlook on life, Pfeifer said. On his website, he compares himself to the Phoenix, the bird of mythology that arises from the ashes to new life.

“I feel I have emerged from the fire, and I am living the life I love; and as chance would have it, I now find myself working with fire,” he said. “From the fire emerge beautiful things – first, my life and,
second, the art that I am able to create.”

Glass blowing is hot, delicate work. The artist shapes a mass of glass, which has been softened by intense heat in a furnace, by blowing air into it through a tube, adding color and then cooling it slowly.

Pfeifer graduated from the Rochester Institute of Technology in 2010 with a bachelor’s in fine arts and completed a two-year residency at a glass studio in Louisville, Ky. He has been an intern or apprentice at hot shops and galleries around the country, and he has a business – Hot Glass Alley LLC – at a shop in Reading, Pa.

Pfeifer said cancer taught him the value of commitment and determination, and he compares his work with glass to his cancer treatment.

When he is working on a piece of hot, molten glass, he said, he has to stick with it to the end, “even if the outcome is not what I desired.” The piece “undergoes many changes … (and) can almost be lost” but usually turns into something beautiful.

Pfeifer’s diagnosis was a malignant, stage 3 rhabdomyosarcoma – an inoperable tumor behind his left eye that was penetrating his brain.

He was so ill that his doctors sent him on a “Make-a-Wish” trip with his brothers and sister. By the time he was 10, he had attended the funerals of many children whom he had befriended during his long stays in the hospital.

His mother is a nurse and his father, Michael, is an endocrinologist. Their experience in the medical field affected the way they approached their son’s diagnosis and treatment.

“We decided early on, just from watching other patients and families with this disease, that this could either destroy our family or bring us closer together,” said Sonya Pfeifer. “We circled our wagons and made sure that we grew together as a family.”

Pfeifer’s parents were determined that he would not only survive, but thrive. Despite the intense cancer treatments, their son kept up with his education.
“We never allowed Jake to use his illness as an excuse for anything,” Sonya said. “He was never held back in school even though he was in the hospital.”

The radiation made reading a little more difficult, but Pfeifer excelled in other areas.

“He was a math genius and he was very good with his hands,” his mother said. “He just naturally gravitated towards things that were comfortable to do. Glass has a component of science in math in it. He has to be able to understand the chemistry and the measurements; that was easy for him to grasp.”

Pfeifer says his interest in glass was sparked at the age of 14 when he saw glass artists at work in Bermuda. His mother recalls his creative inclinations beginning much earlier than that.

“He always liked Legos and coloring and building blocks. Most of the things that he liked to do were three dimensional, like glass is,” Sonya said. “He has always been very good with working with his hands. He has a lot of fine motor skills and is very agile.”

Michael Rogers, one of Pfeifer’s professors at RIT, said the faculty is proud of his accomplishments in art.

“I was aware of some health issues, but Jake didn’t talk about it,” Rogers said. “He’s a guy who didn’t want to be defined by an illness” and refused special treatment.

“It’s great to see Jake being successful and doing what he loves,” Rogers said.

During his month at the Duncan McClellan Gallery in St. Petersburg, Pfeifer devoted attention to his latest project, a series
inspired by his heritage.

“My grandfather was 25 percent Cherokee. I know I’m only Native American by a small percentage, but it really shaped the way that I grew up,” Pfeifer said. “Mom always had Native American art in the house, and it was something we talked about regularly.”

The vases and bowls in this series feature bright colors and patterns.

“Traditionally, Native American art wouldn’t have all of the bright colors that my pieces do, but that’s my interpretation of my heritage,” said Pfeifer. “I like to think of it as a combination of who I am and where I came from.”

Now that his stint in St. Petersburg is over, Pfeifer said, Florida may well figure in his future. He is considering moving to Florida and opening a studio in Sarasota.

“I love the South,” he said. “I grew up in Kentucky and I’m really looking forward to building my business in an area that I love,” Pfeifer said.

Want to know more?

Jake Pfeifer’s work will be featured through July 6 at the Duncan McClelland Gallery, 2342 Emerson Ave. S in St. Petersburg and then go into the gallery’s general collection. His website is at hotglassalley.com.