

# Essay – Inner Strength from Desperate Times



*By Jake Hovenden - Fairbanks, Alaska*

*As his father slowly succumbed to ALS, student Jake Hovenden was impressed with how lovingly his stepmother cared for his dad. The experience left Hovenden with a belief in the power of inner strength.*

Only a handful of people know this about me, but five years ago my father died of Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis or ALS. This is a fatal disease that literally eats away at a person's muscles until they cannot walk, talk, or even breathe. It was a life changing experience, but I can't really say that I developed any defining beliefs from it. Rather, the whole thing just really confused me on what to believe.

But, this essay is not about my experience with my father's passing. It's about my stepmother.

I believe in inner strength. It was my stepmother, Janey Hovenden, who really had the hardest time when my father was suffering from ALS. For three years she juggled work, my dad and me with virtually no breaks, but she never gave up. Every day, right after she got home from work, she would cook dinner for us. She'd have to feed my father because ALS made it so he was incapable of feeding himself. During the nights my stepmother would stay up with my dad to make sure he wouldn't suffocate while he slept. She'd stay up and comfort him, even though she had to work early the next morning. Janey even fought past her fear of needles in order to treat my dad at home because the last thing he wanted was to lie in a hospital bed during his final days.

My dad was a proud man and didn't want people to see him when he was wasting away, but Janey went against his wishes and invited old friends over to say their final goodbyes. Although he didn't want to admit it, my dad cherished every visit.

I really had not appreciated what my stepmother had done before, but looking back I realize how much she did for my dad. She kept him alive as long as she could, almost single-handedly.

Today Janey is doing well and still taking care of me, just as well as she took care of me and my dad when he was sick. Before my dad passed-on he told Janey that she would have to be my father figure, and though she isn't my dad, she is the next best thing. She jokes around with me about it. Even though I live mostly with my Mom, I still get to see Janey once a week and she has helped me immensely in getting through this

and I think I help her, too. She says I remind her of Dad, and spending time with me and cooking dinner for me helps her remember.

I believe that inner strength emerges when times are desperate. I believe people sometimes refuse to give up, and they help others no matter the personal cost. My stepmother proved that to me.

*Jake Hovenden lives in Fairbanks, Alaska, where he enjoys snowboarding in the winter and ultimate Frisbee during the 24-hours of daylight in the summer. His stepmother helped inspire Hovenden's interest in forensics, which he's considering as a career.*

For discussion or writing:

1. Describe all the ALS characteristics, and give another name for this disease.
2. While Jake's dad was dieing, he stated that the last thing he wanted was "to lie in a hospital bed during his final days." What does he mean by this, do you think?
3. Why did Jake's impression of his step-mom Janey change while his dad was dieing?
4. Why does Jake describe Janey as "the next best thing" to his dad?
5. Jake believes in the power of "inner strength." Describe this and give some examples of inner strength that Jake grew up with.

*Adapted from NPR Series, This I Believe*