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(Unsplash/NRD)

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"Do you think God will open a door and let me in?" Brian was sitting behind his dad in the family's white LaSabre as it sped down Interstate 80 on a snowy January day.

He and his parents were making yet another 300-mile round trip from Onawa to Des Moines, Iowa.

There, doctors at Broadlawns Hospital will drain large amounts of toxic fluid from his abdomen. But it will build up again and the same long trip will be necessary — or will it? Brian understood that death was not far away and began talking about who would be his pallbearers and asking what it would be like to be dead. He did not make the return trip. Brian died nine days later at the age of 48.

My nephew Brian was a normal baby until the age of 2 when he suffered an intense fever followed by changes in his behavior. Doctors at the University of Iowa told his parents he would always be a special needs person — mentally challenged, autistic, one who needed extra care. He was a handsome child with wavy brown hair and gentle dark eyes. His physical development was like that of his seven brothers and sisters, but his mental capacities were a jumble of brilliance and a lack of comprehension.

Some said he was a savant, for within seconds he could tell you the day of the week on which you were born if you gave him your birth date. And he never forgot the exact days visitors came nor the year and make of their cars. But Brian couldn't balance a checkbook and had a limited sense of the value of money. With assistance he attended the local school and graduated with a special high school diploma.

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His first job was in a sheltered workshop where they made wooden pallets for local businesses and operated a can crusher. This work was with other persons who were also mentally challenged, and Brian also wanted to be around people who were not. So he sought employment at Fiesta Foods, the local grocery store where he enjoyed a different level of work and companionship. He also earned a little more money stocking shelves and keeping the store clean. He wanted to be on his own, so his parents helped him move into a mobile home park along Highway 175, a major road that runs through Onawa's main street, "the widest downtown street in America." The small units on the edge of town were adequate and inexpensive. There he and his housemate divided everything exactly, even to which side of the refrigerator was theirs.

Brian's dad, a former Iowa highway patrolman, helped him buy a previously owned maroon Buick, and having wheels gave him great satisfaction. Brian understood maps and made an annual trip to attend the Clay County Fair in Spencer. There, he experienced a week of freedom, a week where he could be like everyone else, where no one knew he was different and he could walk through the buildings with prize-winning animals of the 4-H Club and watch the tractor pulls and enjoy the fragrance and of fries and taste of burgers from one of the food stands. Then in the evening he would drive 15 miles to stay with his Aunt Mary and Uncle Charles on their farm near Terril.

When the mobile home park was purchased for future development, it was demolished, and Brian moved into an apartment where he enjoyed independent living. The proposed development is now a grassy park.

CasinOmaha, located five miles west of town on the Missouri River, fascinated Brian, perhaps because of his ability with numbers. He decided to be a blackjack dealer. That required special training, so he got a job in the maintenance department there and took the course four times. Finally, he met the requirements and became one of the best dealers the casino ever had. He loved shuffling the cards, being friendly with the players, hearing the clang of the slot machines and collecting generous tips. He wore black pants, a white shirt and red suspenders, which gave him a handsome appearance and confidence. Unfortunately, he fell asleep at his turn on the midnight watch and was fired.



View of downtown Onawa, Iowa, Dec. 25, 2018, along Hwy 175, called "the widest downtown street in America" (Wikimedia Commons/Jared Winkler)

So it was back to Fiesta Foods where the manager was delighted to have him again and increased Brian's working hours. He began delivering groceries to homebound customers on Tuesdays and Thursdays. He loaded his car with their orders and spent time with them as he unpacked their groceries, asking how they were getting along and promising to be back next week. This was the most enjoyable part of his job because he loved helping people and being a part of their lives.

Brian recognized that his social life was limited. He loved children, especially his nieces and nephews but knew he would never marry and have his own. He had a deep faith, attended weekly Mass at St. John's and kept in close contact with his parents and family. The local demolition derby at the Onawa fairgrounds attracted him every summer. He enjoyed being part of the crew and watching these old cars keep going as long as they could in spite of losing wheels, fenders and other unnecessary parts, sort of like people do.

Winter evenings were spent watching cartoons such as "Scooby-Doo" and drinking too much beer. This resulted in considerable weight gain, diabetes and cirrhosis of the liver, and, in spite of advice from family and friends, he continued to slide to a point of no return. Gradually, Brian realized this and hoped God would open a door for him. Perhaps because so many doors to what some would call a normal life were closed to him, this last one would be open.

Throughout his life, a constant flow of energy helped him through situations that would have discouraged others. This energy, this grace that held him in God's arms, is reflected in these lines from a [poem](#) by Jan Phillips:

And I hold you like sunshine

and bright colored flowers

I am with you always,

I never let you go

Wherever you journey,

I journey beside you

for you are the river

and I am the flow.

Brian worked in the grocery store until shortly before his death. When he died, the people of Onawa felt a great loss. Everyone knew him, and he knew each of them. The store manager said Brian was the greatest ambassador he would ever have. He would welcome each customer by name and ask about their families. The funeral home was crowded, and people lined up outside in freezing January weather to say farewell to this modest, innocent man whose greatest pleasure was in knowing them. Indeed, God must have opened the door and welcomed Brian with open arms.

[Mercy Sr. Elizabeth Mary Burns, 91, lives at McAuley Life Center in Farmington Hills, Michigan. She spent her life in health care ministry and has written a book on the history of the Sisters of Mercy in health care.]

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