

Jodi Brookhart Award Nomination 2024: Bryce Keaton

Bryce started swimming for DSSL in 2018 as part of the Umstead Pines at Willowhaven Wave team at the age of 9. He rapidly took to the sport and fell in love with all aspects of racing his friends and competitors. He progressed very quickly, began placing top 6 in multiple strokes, and had admirations of beating existing Willowhaven Wave records for his age group.

Around age 11, Bryce's parents noticed a predominate caving in his chest. Initially, his primary doctors did not seem concerned by it, but as he got older the condition worsened. Eventually, Bryce was diagnosed with a condition called Pectus Excavatum. Pectus excavatum is a congenital chest wall deformity that is caused by growth abnormality of the cartilage that connects the ribs to the breastbone (sternum). This causes a depression of the sternum which causes the chest to have a "sunken in" or "funnel chest" appearance. Cases can range from mild to severe, with severe cases having an impact on both lung and heart functions. At that time, Bryce was on the milder side, so they decided to wait to see if the condition worsened.

In 2021 his parents could see this was progressively getting worse as Bryce grew so they decided to seek secondary opinions. They located a well-respected doctor in Raleigh that specializes in treatment options for Pectus. Upon his initial visit they were given various options to repair his condition surgically if it were warranted by measurements. Pectus is typically measured by the Haller Index which measures distances between both sides of the ribcage along with the distance from the breastbone to the spinal cord. A visual examination was performed and found his Haller index ratio to be approximately 2.5cm. Anything above 3.2cm is considered a severe ratio and deemed medically required for surgery due to heart and/or lung impact. Since his number was just below what was deemed surgically necessary to correct, the doctors advised that they wait one year to reevaluate and ensure all specifications were met to be approved by insurance.

In 2022 during his follow-up appointment, his Haller index had increased dramatically to 6.4cm...double the category of severe. He was starting to experience shortness of breath and became more easily fatigued when exerting himself through swimming and other sporting hobbies. The right side of his heart was found to be 50% impacted. His doctor recommended proceeding with a Nuss procedure which would require inserting 2 steel bars into his chest to restructure the chest cavity. His parents agreed and so they started preparing for the various testing requirements to submit for insurance approval.

Between Dec. of 2022 through June of 2023 his surgical team completed CT scans, MRI's, EKG's and stress tests to get the information needed by insurance to deem the procedure warranted as "medically necessary". This long and drawn-out process took a toll on all involved emotionally. They had to endure numerous levels of submissions, rejections and appeals before insurance finally approved the procedure in June of last year. Bryce finally had the go ahead for the surgery he so desperately needed, but he was determined to finish his season with the Wave first. So, instead of scheduling it immediately, he pushed it to early August. The Wave was counting on him, and he was not going to let his team down.

Throughout all these physical and emotional trials, Bryce kept a positive attitude and continued to persevere in swimming and other sports despite his circumstances. Even though it was extremely tiring and hard to breathe, he steadily progressed in swimming both in summer swim for the Wave and

year-round with Carolina Aquatic Team. He has achieved many swimming accolades along the way including several Willowhaven Wave records in multiple age brackets. While at the worst point of his condition, he beat a 17-year record at Willowhaven last summer in the 13-14 Boys Freestyle with a time of 23.58! He was determined not to let his physical challenges hold him back from competing at the highest level. Bryce's surgery last summer was deemed a success and after his long recovery, he was back in the water. He has continued to excel in swimming. He has been a triple winner 4 times this summer. He has been a Junior Coach for the Wave the last two summers and is doing an amazing job of passing his passion for the sport onto the next generation. After approximately 3 years, Bryce's doctors will reevaluate the structure of his chest cavity. If the steel bars have done their job properly, he will undergo another surgery to remove the bars. We are confident that with his determination, he will continue to grow in the sport of swimming and be successful in anything he sets out to do. Bryce Keaton truly embodies the heart and spirit behind the Jodi Brookhart award.

ONCE A WAVE, ALWAYS A WAVE!