



Boy bullied to death, dad says

By Michele Mandel

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PICKERING - Mitchell Wilson worked so hard to be a normal, happy-go-lucky kid.

Lord knows fate didn't make that easy. The 11-year-old lost his mom to cancer three years ago and was diagnosed with muscular dystrophy the following year. He never could run and jump like the other children. Still he always maintained that goofy grin on his face. He was a joker who loved swimming and go-karting, driving with his dad and making silly jokes with his younger stepsisters.

And Mitchell loved to walk. Six times a day, he'd be pounding the pavement around his Pickering home because the doctors told him he had to "use it or lose it" — that the only way of slowing the atrophy of his muscles was to exercise them. And while he used a walker at school — more as protection from the jostling of his fellow students — he proudly walked outside on his own, his young shoulders pressed back so that he could maintain his fragile balance and not fall.

"Everybody in the neighbourhood knew him. He walked in the rain. He walked in the snow," recalls his dad, Craig Wilson. "Every step Mitchell had to make was like 10 steps of ours in effort. I don't think I ever understood how hard it was for him to do the simple tasks.

"He tried so hard to make it through each day and he was so tired at the end that he could barely make it up the stairs."

Yet he never gave up — until a young bully stole his will to live; A young offender who will likely walk free next week.

Mitchell's father is a big man, tough and strong with a smile that comes easily — until he begins relating what happened that morning, just over two weeks ago, when he went into his son's bedroom to wake him up for his first day of Grade 6. "I relive it every morning," he says softly. "It's a horrible thing."

His best buddy was gone. His tormented 11-year-old child had tied a plastic bag around his head, weary of the bullying and terrified of the young mugger he was supposed to face in court next week.

"If he had been treated with respect, if he had been treated with some empathy, some sympathy," his dad says, "he'd probably still be here."

It was during one of Mitchell's beloved walks last fall that everything changed.

He'd borrowed his dad's iPhone so he could listen to music and used it to call home and check about dinner time. In the nearby schoolyard, a young punk spied the cellphone and decided he'd take it for his own. The 12-year-old jumped the disabled boy, slamming Mitchell's mouth so hard into the pavement that he broke his teeth.

The young offender was arrested the next day, charged with assault and robbery and ordered to stay 500 metres away from his victim — an order he breached at least twice.

"Mitchell was never the same after the mugging, he lost the spark in his eye," his father explains. "He realized how weak he really was and how he was unable to defend himself. Being a young man, he was a very proud kid and the fact he couldn't defend himself in that situation hurt his self-esteem, irreparably."

The thief's friends began bullying Mitchell at school and following him home, demanding to know why he was taking their pal to court. "The better question is why did you choose to prey on my son when he knew he was disabled?" Wilson asks. "In my opinion, he's just a predator who preys on the weak." Mitchell stopped sleeping and began suffering anxiety attacks. He told his family he'd rather kill himself than go back to school where he was being bullied. They got him counselling and the principal assigned a Grade 8 student to be his protector at school.

But he wouldn't venture outside alone anymore. His six walks a day dwindled down to two when his dad and stepmom could be with him. His mobility plummeted by 20% over the summer. "It took him 10 minutes to ascend the stairs. I had to help him out of the pool. If he fell, he couldn't get up from the ground anymore," his father recalls. "His future was bleak. Once you stop walking, the progress of the disease takes over at a heightened pace."

Wilson never told Mitchell what lay ahead, of his shorter life span, of the wheelchair and feeding tube. But he suspected he knew: his son was a bright boy who could easily navigate the Internet. "He knew this was the last summer of Mitchell — where he could go go-karting, go in the boat at the cottage, walk around freely although it was a struggle, swim without being lifted by a big lift into the swimming pool." Also looming ahead was returning to school without his protector — the student had graduated — and the case against his mugger. On Labour Day, Mitchell was served with a subpoena to appear in court Sept. 28 to testify against the boy who had robbed him.

That night, without warning, he took his life.

"Being permanently confined to a wheelchair 100% of his days and being a spectator in life and watch other kids have fun, he decided to ultimately end it all. End his worries," his father believes, grasping at an explanation for a tragedy that defies understanding. "He doesn't have to deal with the bullies anymore. He doesn't have to feel people are staring at him."

The young offender goes to court next week but Mitchell's family has been warned the charges will likely be dropped since the boy is no longer here to identify him. They still want to deliver their victim impact statements just the same, to try and tell this young criminal what he set in motion in the slim hope that he will think before preying again on the vulnerable.

"I'm hoping my emotions would affect him. I want him to get it. I want him to truly get it, and not blow it off. But I'm not sure if he's capable of having those feelings," Wilson says fiercely. "We all just need to understand what the disabled go through, the every day things we take for granted."

Five hundred people attended Mitchell's funeral. Photos of the sweet, grinning boy filled the room as his father delivered his heartbreaking eulogy. He's asked how he could ever find the strength to do it. "What would you do for your best friend?" he replies simply. "He was my buddy."

His eyes well with tears now. The brave face crumples away. "It goes without saying that I miss him every day," his father says. "I love him. I hope he's okay."