

Jeanne White-Ginder Biography

One week before Christmas in 1984, Jeanne White-Ginder was told that her son Ryan, a hemophiliac, had contracted AIDS from a tainted blood product. Although the doctors gave him only six months to live, Ryan's outlook was positive and he was determined to live a relatively normal life. He wanted to stay in school and Jeanne was determined to give her son his dream.

What seemed like a small wish turned into a nightmare when the White's hometown of Kokomo, Indiana, frightened and uneducated on the realities of AIDS, abused the family and refused to allow Ryan to return to school. Jeanne turned to the court system and the news wire grabbed on to the story. Ryan became a reluctant international celebrity and Jeanne became an educator of the masses.

As she became a key player in a frightening new health crisis, Jeanne vaulted from anonymity to being a media regular. Her insight into people living with AIDS and family members affected by AIDS earned her the respect of national health figures and interviewers alike.

Jeanne and Ryan won their initial battle for the right to go to school. The courts forced the town to allow Ryan to attend school! However, the town's antagonism remained unmercifully alive. The abuse came to a peak when a bullet was shot through the White's picture window. Jeanne immediately began to look for a new home and community.

Their ticket out of Kokomo was the advance for "The Ryan White Story," a made for TV movie based on Ryan's struggles. The Whites took the money and moved to Cicero, Indiana, where to their relief, they were wholeheartedly welcomed. Ryan went to school, became an honor roll student, earned a driver's license and traveled to visit Elton John and Michael Jackson, but his health was rapidly deteriorating. On Sunday, April 8, 1990, five and a half years after he was diagnosed with AIDS, Ryan White died. Jeanne, her daughter Andrea and Elton John were by his side.

In the on-going weeks, Jeanne received 60,000 pieces of mail. She set up shop in her basement and at Phil Donahue's urging and generosity, hired an assistant. Together, they began answering all of those letters. As they read over the correspondence, Jeanne realized she needed to continue Ryan's legacy of education and compassion. Jeanne worked on getting Ryan's book - written by him for other children - published, and appeared at many AIDS fundraisers and benefits. In May of 1990, Senators Edward Kennedy and Orin Hatch invited her to Washington, D.C., to lobby for the "Ryan White Comprehensive AIDS Resource Care Act (CARE)," a bill that called for federal funding of AIDS education, research and medical care. The bill passed and continues today.

In August of 1990, Jeanne stepped onto the lecture circuit, realizing that this was another avenue for educating young people about HIV/AIDS. She did not claim to be an eloquent speaker; she merely relayed personal triumphs and tragedies of life with Ryan. Her words continue to touch the hearts of all that will listen.

Today, Jeanne serves on the advisory board of The AIDS Institute, and speaks across the country about her story as a mom, and seeks to educate teens and adolescents on the personal, family, and community issues related to HIV/AIDS. Her book "Weeding out the Tears: A Mother's Story of Love, Loss and Renewal," was published in 1997. The book is a gripping account of her life since Ryan's death and her feelings about coping with the loss of her son, her daughter's life, remarriage, stepchildren and emotionally charged AIDS issues. In the end, Jeanne hopes through Ryan's name and her efforts, she will create better understanding, acceptance and love for people with AIDS.

Jeanne and Andrea donated Ryan's bedroom full of memorabilia to the Indianapolis Children's Museum and it is now proudly displayed in an exhibit called "The Power of Children," which features the lives of three children: Anne Frank, Ruby Bridges and Ryan White, who each fought discrimination. Jeanne lives in Leesburg, Florida, with her husband of 22 years. Jeanne's daughter and best friend, Andrea, is a 6th grade Geography teacher in Umatilla, Florida, where she coaches volleyball and soccer.