

## Man with cerebral palsy gets his one wish — to be a Marine

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Charles “Chuckie” Stroop did all he could not to tear up, but in the end, the honor he now shared with his father was too great.

As dozens of well-wishers looked on in the backyard of a Glenn Heights mobile home, a contingent of Marines in full regalia swore Stroop in as an honorary Marine, promoting him to private first class.

It was the wish Stroop had always had, the thing he’d carried, a dream inspired by his father, who had served as a Marine. Because of a lifetime fighting [cerebral palsy](#), it was a dream Stroop had never been able to achieve — until now.

“When you’re a Marine, you’re in a brotherhood that lasts forever,” said Stroop’s father, Victor. “It swells my heart with pride to see my brothers step up and do something like this for one of my children.”

Chuckie Stroop, 31, was the smaller of two prematurely born twins and was ultimately diagnosed with cerebral palsy and [hydrocephalus](#). (His twin, Thomas, has had no related medical issues.) Since age 4, Stroop has endured more than a dozen surgeries to replace a shunt placed in his head to drain built-up cerebrospinal fluid.

He uses a walker to get around.

A few weeks ago, family friend Zane Predmore happened to ask Stroop what he wished for more than anything else. “I thought maybe he would say a girlfriend or to go to [Disneyland](#),” Predmore said.

“But what’s Chuckie say? He says, ‘I want to be a Marine.’”

While Stroop’s disability might slow him down, he doesn’t let it stop him.

“To him, it’s normal,” said his mother, Deniese, an insurance agent in Mansfield.

As a kid, he wanted to do it all. When the neighborhood boys all got skateboards for Christmas, he didn’t want to be left out. “The next thing I know, they’ve got that boy duct-taped to a skateboard, going down the street,” she said.

When he was old enough, she even acquiesced to his hopes to drive a car, but when they almost ended up in the Trinity River, that was enough of that.

“The only thing I’ve never allowed him to do that he wanted to do was ride a bull,” she said. “I said, ‘No, we can’t duct-tape you to a bull.’”

From the beginning, the staff at Children’s Medical Center’s Low Birth Weight Clinic encouraged tough love.

If Chuckie wanted a toy on the other side of the room, he had to crawl and get it. “He’d work for 30 minutes to go across the floor and get that toy,” Deniese Stroop said. “I’d be, like, ‘Come on, Chuckie!’”

Likewise, if he wanted a drink of water, she’d make him mouth the words. “And he would do it,” Deniese said. “Now he talks faster than any of my other boys. He’s a smart young man.”

Though Stroop graduated on time with his classmates at Red Oak High in 1999 — an occasion that earned him a standing ovation — he has rarely held a job. According to his mother, he has filled out a hundred job applications, “but when he goes in for the interview, they never call him back.”

Stroop spends his time helping his father around the house, gardening, putting up fences. He got to know Predmore, a retired Navy veteran, through Predmore’s son Andy, who had been a high school classmate at Red Oak. The two developed a bond after Stroop found out Predmore had been a sailor.

From then on, Stroop peppered Predmore with questions: What did you do? Where did you go? What was war like? Did you lose any friends?

“It was something he always wanted to do in his life and wasn’t able to do,” Predmore said.

“Being in the military for more than 20 years, I meet a lot of patriotic people, but this kid just struck me,” Predmore said. “He just always talked about America — the freedoms we should appreciate, the young men and women in uniform fighting for the American flag.”

Earlier this year, Predmore took Stroop to his VFW post in Arlington. "He just wanted to talk to every vet sitting in the post, and he thanked them for their service," Predmore said.

As they hung out over beers, Stroop told Predmore that his father, a diesel mechanic, had served in the [Marine Corps](#) and that he wanted to buy a shadow box to showcase some of his father's military items.

Predmore showed him a catalog, and Stroop began saving some of his Supplemental Security Income to buy his dad a \$200 display box etched with, "Semper Fi," the Marine motto of "always faithful."

It was all worth it, he told Predmore later, to see the look on his dad's face.

"He's just an outstanding kid," Predmore said.

It was Stroop's latest medical episode, a few weeks ago, that convinced Predmore it was time to make something happen. "When I went to the hospital, I felt in my heart I would not see him alive again," Predmore said.

But like he had so many times before, Stroop fought through the battle and came out on the other side.

Once Stroop told him his wish was to be a Marine, Predmore couldn't sleep. How could he make it happen, he wondered? In 10 days, after a series of phone calls and the help of various VFW personnel, things fell into place, and Saturday's surprise was set.

As far as Stroop knew, the occasion was going to be a chance for him to formally present the shadow box to his father. A number of local businesses donated everything from food, tables and bouquets.

"I can't believe I got it accomplished," Predmore said.

Stroop came in, suave in a sleek blue shirt and white tie. "You're looking sharp as a knife," brother Thomas told him.

Then the surprise was on, and Staff Sgt. Tom Bailey, commandant of the Capt. John Yancey Detachment of the Marine Corps League in Dallas, presented Stroop with a camouflage jacket emblazoned with his name.

"I never got the chance to do what I wanted to do for my country," an emotional Stroop said. "I thank God for the people who gave their lives for this country. That means a hell of a lot."