

# THE HARBINGER

PAGES 4-5 ► INFORMATION AND STUDENT OPINIONS ON THE DRUG DOGS

## WATER CHANGES EVERYTHING

Senior uses Charity Water campaign to put past trauma in perspective

► photo illustration by Jake Crandall



►written by Matt Hanson

Senior Jack Sernett won't be getting any gifts for Christmas.

But that's his choice. He wants his family to use their money for something more important than his presents. He wants them to donate to his personal Charity Water campaign. Somewhere in the world, there are thousands of villagers whose lives he can save with clean water. He just needs the money to do so. With an ultimate goal of \$20,000, Jack needs all the money he can get.

So Jack will give up his Christmas for his campaign. But while he probably won't get any presents this year, Jack's Christmas will still be a lot better than his last one.

Because this Christmas, Jack will be saving lives.

Because this Christmas, he's not the one who needs saving.

\* \* \*

Jack sits at his desk staring at a physics test. His chest hurts. He feels like he's having a heart attack. He starts to sweat. His mind races.

*Oh my god. I'm gonna fail this test. If I get an F, there go my chances of going to an out of state college.*

This test is everything.

He can't even finish it. He's frozen in worry. Buried by negative thoughts and fear. Frozen. Helpless.

Finally, he gets up in the middle of the test and asks to excuse himself. In the hall, he calls his mom.

"I just can't do this right now. I have no control."

\* \* \*

Jack began having anxiety attacks like this daily in the second quarter of his junior year. He had always dealt with anxiety problems and had been diagnosed with General Anxiety Disorder, but junior year was worse. Thoughts of his workload, his soccer games or his future brought on intense anxiety.

As Jack's anxiety grew worse, he began to worry those around him. In class, he'd be stone quiet. He wouldn't interact with anyone around him.

"Everyone has off days, but [for Jack] it seemed like it was everyday," Jack's longtime friend, senior Mason Pashia, said. "It was sad to see that happen because he's such a good guy. He's the nicest guy I've ever met."

His parents tried to calm him down. They tried to help him see things positively. Jack's mom, Jenny, even made lists of things he should have been happy about. He was healthy. He was smart. He was athletic.

"There were so many positives," Jack's dad, Tim, said. "[We were] just trying to get him to not be anxious about everything and look at the positive side of life."

But Jack couldn't see it. Tim said that Jack's disorder made him hard to reason with.

"An anxiety disorder is not based in rational thought," Tim said. "We started to figure that out. You start to understand that anything you try to say probably isn't gonna help. The person needs to figure it out for themselves."

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By winter break, things were getting worse. Jack's anxiety was driving him into depression. He lost all sense of purpose. He couldn't enjoy anything, not even Christmas.

"It started getting so extensive, the anxiety, that I got tired of it," Jack said. "I got tired of suffering."

\* \* \*

Jack stands in front of the mirror in his bathroom. He usually can't look at himself, but tonight he's forgotten to keep his bathroom light off while he brushes his teeth. He catches a glimpse of himself in the mirror.

He hates what he sees. He doesn't see what others would see. He doesn't see a varsity soccer captain. He doesn't see a 4.0 student.

He just sees the kid who went on an eating binge that day. He sees a kid who needs to be healthier. He sees a kid who's not skinny enough.

When Jack looks in the mirror, he sees failure.

Jack won't eat tomorrow. He'll just exercise. He hates himself when he binges. He hates himself for his body.

He just wants to be healthy, but nothing Jack's doing is healthy.

Since sophomore year, Jack had had a mild fixation on health and exercise. He even became a vegan early in his junior year. But as the year went on and his anxiety got worse, his fixation on health developed into a full-blown eating disorder. In his anxiety, his diet became one of the only things he could control.

"My anxiety would get put away with me controlling what I eat," Jack said. "That was the only thing I had control over, was when I could eat. And I didn't have any control over anything else."

He'd restrict what he ate severely and started exercising intensely. For days at a time, he'd eat very little, and when he ate, he only ate light and "healthy." Then he'd binge, eating everything he could until he was so full he couldn't eat for an entire day. Binging led to body-image issues, which made him stop eating again. As this cycle ran its course, Jack lost 25 pounds in a short period. At 6 feet 4 inches and 135 pounds, he had quickly become extremely underweight.

Jack sank deeper into depression and self-loathing. Sometime early in fourth quarter, he decided he'd had enough. Tired of living under the crushing weight of his anxiety, he began to look for a way out.

"I was getting tired of living like that, so I started thinking, 'You know, it'd be kind of nice if I could just end this and wouldn't have to go through this ever again,'" Jack said.

When he started having suicidal thoughts, Jack knew it was time to get help.

\* \* \*

It's Thursday, Apr. 26, but Jack isn't at school. He won't be for the rest of the year. He's in his dad's Honda Pilot, riding north on his way to Rogers Memorial Hospital in Milwaukee.

Jack's worried. He's worried about missing the rest of his junior year. That he might have to retake his classes. That people will wonder about his absence.

But most of all, Jack's worried that this isn't going to work. In his mind, he sees Rogers Memorial Hospital as his last shot to get better. He's tried everything. Therapy. Meds. None of it has worked.

And if Rogers Memorial Hospital doesn't work, he doesn't know what will.

\* \* \*

*I am strong.*

Those three words, scrawled in expo marker on Jack's bathroom mirror in Rogers Memorial, are his first big steps towards recovery. He's trying to do what nurses, therapists and his parents have urged him to do: see himself and his life in a positive light. It's just three words, but it's a start.

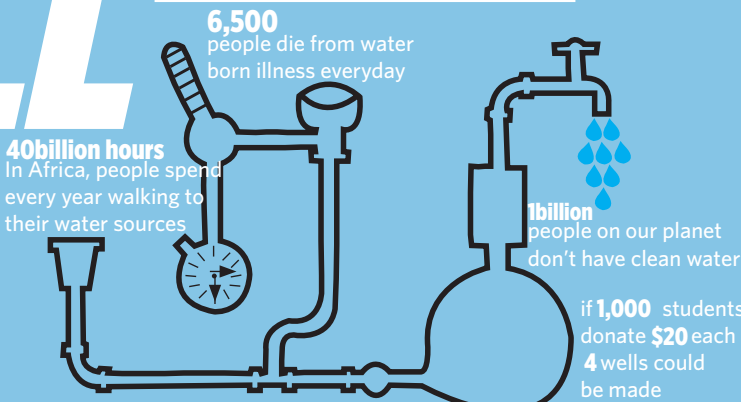
After a brief stay in the in-patient hospital in Milwaukee, where doctors examined him to make sure he could handle further treatment, Jack moved to the residential facility a half hour outside Milwaukee. Everyday he stayed at Rogers Memorial, Jack wrote a new positive mantra about himself on his bathroom mirror.



►photo illustration by Jake Crandall

# GETTING WELL

Non-profit charity water organization helps senior Jack Sernett through hard times



on him at first—they all triggered his anxiety. But he kept doing them, several a day, and his anxiety improved.

"[I realized] that most of the stuff I worried about was either out of my control or untrue," Jack said. "Like all of my worries about not doing well in school were untrue because I had only had one B at East."

After a month at Rogers Memorial, it was time for Jack to leave. He wasn't fully recovered, but his insurance had cut him off early. Still, he'd come a long way. On his first day at the residential facility, Jack had rated his anxiety and depression on a scale from 1-10, with 10 being the worst. He had given 10s for both. On his last day, he gave his final ratings. Depression: 1. Anxiety: 2.

Despite his progress, Jack still wasn't sure if he could do it on his own. But then his friends said their goodbyes.

"You're such a nice person."

"You're such a strong person."

"I believe that you can do this."

For the first time, Jack heard the words from his bathroom mirror said back to him.

I can do this, Jack thought. I can recover.

Then, 35 days after leaving Kansas City, Jack headed home.

\* \* \*

Jack stands at the front of the choir room. He's doing something that just a few months ago he would never have been

Jack learned in Wisconsin clicked.

"One day I just woke up and was like, 'I'm tired of feeling this way,'" he said. "I'm tired of feeling like crap. I'm tired of being anxious every second of the day. I'm gonna do everything I can to change that."

After that, Jack started to turn everything around. He lowered his standards for school, worried less and began enjoying life more. As Jack has emerged from his anxiety and depression, so has his true personality. Once a self-described loner, he has started being social again. He makes an effort to greet everyone he knows in the halls. In the past three months, he says he's been more social than he had been in the previous three years at East.

"It's absolutely amazing," Jenny said. "I remember the first time we saw him at the Lancer Day parade. I hadn't seen him unabashedly laugh in a while. I was like, 'Wow, where has he been?'"

As he begins to look at his life positively, Jack says he feels like he's been reborn.

"I was not me for two to three years," he said. "This is who I'm going to be from now on. It's a habit now. Be happy. Even if something goes wrong, I just try to smile about it, laugh about it."

In early October, Jack found a new calling for his new life: Charity Water. Jack was messing around on YouTube one day when he came upon a video from a charity called Charity Water. The video explained how over a billion people on Earth don't have clean water. How someone dies every 19 seconds from a lack of clean water. And most importantly, how just \$5,000 could build a well that would save thousands of lives.

Watching that video put everything in perspective for Jack. As he heard about the severe problems people have due to a lack of clean water, Jack felt how lucky he was. Suddenly, everything he had been through seemed insignificant.

So Jack made his own Charity Water site (www.mycharitywater.org/savinglivesonewellatime) and began collecting money for his own campaign. Now, he's trying to raise \$2,500 by Dec. 31, with an end goal of \$20,000. To reach this, he travels from class to class during his lab aide class first hour, giving speeches and asking his peers to give \$20 each to his campaign. A month into the campaign, Jack has raised more than \$1,500.

For his speeches, Jack carries a page of facts on the global water shortage in his planner. At the top he's scribbled, "Water Changes Everything." For the villagers Jack's trying to help, water will grow crops, keep kids in school and prevent deaths from dirty water. For Jack, water gives him perspective on his own problems.

"I went through my own struggles, but there are so many people who have worse struggles than I had," Jack said. "Water has changed my outlook on life. It has made me realize how scarce quality water is amongst so many people in this world. Water has helped me decide to dedicate the rest of my life to helping people."

Although Jack's doing his campaign for many reasons, one reason is that so many people have helped him. His family. His friends from Rogers Memorial. Nurses. Doctors. Psychologists. His whole world worked to save his life. Now, he wants to pay it forward.

"The last three to four months, but more importantly the last three or four years, people have been helping me every day to recover, helping me save my life, helping me be a normal person and live life to the fullest," Jack said. "I feel like it's my job now to help people who need it most."

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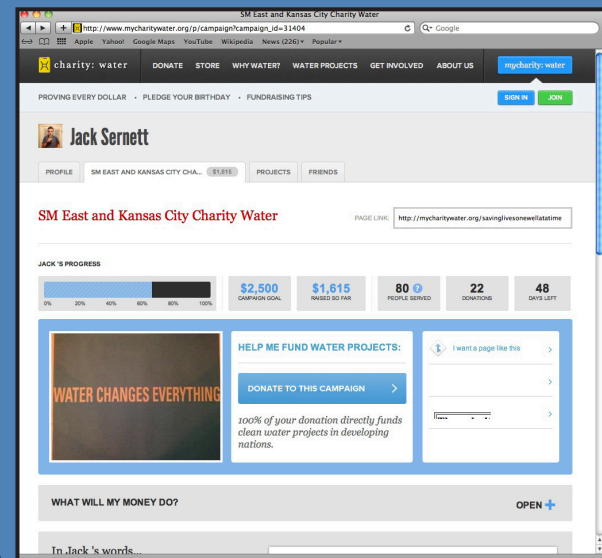
Jack sits at his desk staring at his Calculus test. The paper is so covered in markings he actually takes a picture of the one page without errors.

With a 76 percent, it's far from the grade Jack wanted, but he's not going to let it ruin his Friday. He knows there are more important things in his life. Things that he should be happy about. Things that not everyone has.

Things like clean water.

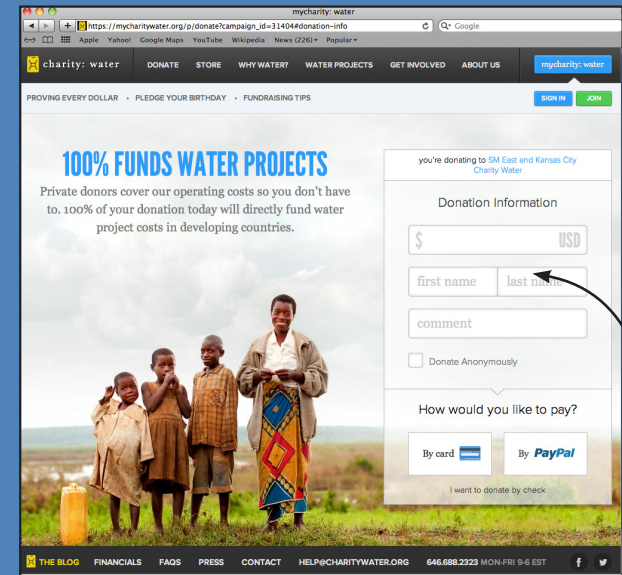
# HOW TO DONATE

a step by step process on how to donate to Jack's water project



go to [www.mycharitywater.org/savinglivesonewellatime](http://www.mycharitywater.org/savinglivesonewellatime)

or scan this QR code on your smart phone



Enter in the amount of money you would like to donate, your name, and your type of payment

Now, you've donated to Jack's water project