A boy named Joey
Traveling north to remember

BY CHARLES OBERG, M.D., M.P.H.

It has been more than 30 years since I last drove north on I-35 to Ely, the gateway to the Boundary Waters Canoe Area. The last time was a trip with my wife to attend the funeral of a young man, the first patient I lost as a pediatrics intern.

Joey had cystic fibrosis, the most common congenital disorder, and he was my first encounter with the disease. He had been referred to the University of Minnesota for repeated pneumonias that had sapped his energy and left him with limited pulmonary function. I remember looking at his X-rays and thinking his lungs looked like those of an elderly person with end-stage emphysema rather than those of an adolescent. Joey struggled with each breath. Yet he had a strong will to live and displayed a sense of peace as his impending death approached.

I am not sure why I spent time with Joey. It would have been easy enough to avoid his room, except to take his vital signs and do a quick daily exam. Yet, I remember sitting with him on the ward late at night while on call. He was in a small negative-pressure isolation room so as to minimize the chance he would contract an infectious disease. We would tell each other stories or sometimes just sit silently. There was little I could do for him medically. He had stopped responding to antimicrobial, respiratory and nutritional therapies. At the start of my four-week rotation he required oxygen only occasionally, but by the end he needed it for every breath. He experienced loss of appetite, loss of weight, loss of energy—but never loss of spirit. I was his young doctor, companion and friend, and I cared for him until his last breath.

Joey had a loving family. They still live in Ely, and each Christmas my wife and I receive a card from them saying that if we are ever that far north to drop in. So I need to head north to see his mom. To let her know how much her son touched my life, that he taught me more about courage and grace in four weeks than I could have ever imaged. So today I am driving north—and looking back on a boy named Joey.

Charles Oberg is a professor and director of the Maternal and Child Health Program in the University of Minnesota’s School of Public Health. He also practices pediatrics at Hennepin County Medical Center.