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deep
ROOTS

*A Story of
Friendship & Faith*

STORY BY BILLY JASON FRYE
PHOTOGRAPHY BY LOGAN WALLACE

The first time you meet Chad Biggerstaff and John Sweeney, you'd think they grew up together. They've got the ease and unspoken communication of old friends down pat. It's no surprise. They grew up less than 15 miles from each other, surfed the same waters, played the same sports, went to the same kind of church and graduated high school a year apart. The only thing that separated them was the Cape Fear River. Chad grew up in Wilmington and John in Leland, and although they shared passions, they never met until later in life. I met them at BlueWave Dentistry, the dental practice they share in Waterford, and they told me their story.

"It's funny to think of it now," says John, "but when we met on the first day of dental school orientation at UNC Chapel Hill, we hit it off like we'd known each other forever."

Chad nods in agreement. But there's something unspoken hanging in the air between them. After a moment, Chad picks up the thread of the story.

"I met John that first day and I thought 'I could really be friends with this guy,'" says Chad. "It was exciting to think I'd found a friend among my classmates so quickly. We were all ready for orientation to be over so we could start our classes, but ..."

Another pause.

"But I got into a bike accident two days later."



several 40- to 50-mile training sessions a week. He was returning home from one such ride when tragedy struck.

Coming down Airport Road in Chapel Hill, a car misjudged his speed and turned in front of him. They hit head on.

"I don't remember the accident at all," Chad says. "I remember that I was doing the speed limit, 35 or 40 miles an hour. I remember seeing the car and waking up in the hospital a day or so later and talking to the police officer who was the first on the scene."

Chad hit the oncoming car near the

When Chad moved from Wilmington to Chapel Hill in 1994 he had to give up his life-long love of surfing. Searching for another physical outlet, he discovered mountain-bike racing. Soon he turned to road bikes and became a quick convert, logging

Above: Good friends John Sweeney (left) and Chad Biggerstaff go to the same church, surf the same breaks, hang out with each other's families and work together at BlueWave Dentistry in Leland.

passenger side headlight. The impact sheared off the front wheel and forks just below the headset of the bike. He went over the hood, into the windshield and, according to eyewitness reports, did three-and-a-half flips in midair before landing on his head 90 feet away. The rest of his bike ended up hanging in a tree over the road.

His list of injuries was extensive. Spiral fracture of the left femur. Separated shoulder. Missing tooth. Crushed knuckle. Right ear almost torn off. Between these injuries and the multiple lacerations to the legs, arms and face, he lost half the blood in his body.

“They took me to the hospital and did X-Rays and CAT scans and all of their tests and determined that I didn’t have any severe internal injuries,” says Chad. “Then they draped off the lower half of my body and the orthopedists started working on my leg while a plastic surgeon reconstructed and reattached my ear. It took them eight hours to fix me.”

When he awoke in the hospital he had no idea how badly he’d been injured. With no conscious memory of the accident and no real way to evaluate his own injuries, he had to rely on his visitors, his doctors and the fast-acting deacon to evaluate his condition.



“Luckily,” Chad says, then pauses. “Actually it wasn’t luck, it was divine intervention. The first responder was an emergency management police officer who was also a deacon at the church my girlfriend, Julie, and I attended.”

But this wasn’t the only instance of divine intervention in Chad’s story. The second was the fact that the accident was only blocks from UNC Chapel Hill’s hospital, so the response time was quick, probably saving his life.

Above: Biggerstaff grew up in Wilmington and Sweeney grew up in Leland, and they met in dental school at UNC Chapel Hill.

“Even then, I didn’t have a clear picture of the seriousness of the accident and my injuries,” Chad says. “Between being unconscious and being on heavy painkillers, I just wasn’t sure. I knew that I hurt. I knew my face was bandaged and I couldn’t see myself, but I really thought I would be back in school in a week or two.”

John, who was one of the first visitors Chad remembers having, chimes in, "He asked us to take good notes for him and insisted that he'd be back in school with us in no time."

Chad was wrong. After a week in the hospital he realized he couldn't go back to school; his physical therapy was too extensive and exhausting. He moved back to Wilmington, leaving John and his classmates to go through school without him, and leaving Julie back in pharmacy school.

Physical therapy took two and a half months, but Chad rallied and found a job while he worked on his recovery. He

offering a lot of advice that really helped me in the first year."

After graduating in 2004, John moved back to Leland, once more separating the pair. He practiced with another dentist for a while and then opened BlueWave Dentistry in Waterford in August 2005. Over the next two years, John's business grew and Chad graduated and moved back to Wilmington.

Which brings us to the third instance of divine intervention.

"I ran into John one day at Port City Community Church," Chad says. "We were dropping our kids off at Grow

“ I felt that as Chad and I got to know one another and shared our families and faith, we developed a level of trust that's hard to find. ”

wanted to marry Julie and decided to postpone dental school until she finished her studies, even though giving up the spot the dean reserved in the next class meant reapplying for admission into the program. In November 2000 he proposed to Julie; they were married the following July.

In 2003 Chad reapplied and was reaccepted into dental school. John and the rest of his former class were in their senior year when he started over.

"It was great to reconnect with John," Chad says. "He and my former classmates were very supportive,

Zone [the childcare offered by Port City Community Church] and it turned out we had kids only months apart. During those weekly meetings at Grow Zone we talked shop, family, church. Eventually we started surfing together."

"That turned into family outings and dinners out," John says. "Our friendship was rekindled from those brief interactions."

"I had the natural doubts anyone has when they come out of college. What am I doing? What next? John had a few years in the real world on me and he




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Above: Sweeney and Biggerstaff share expertise at BlueWave Dentistry in Waterford.

helped guide me through some of that,” Chad says.

At dinner with their wives one night, John asked Chad to come help him at BlueWave. He had more clients than he could see and another set of hands he could trust would be welcomed. Chad joined him, a couple of days a week at first, then more and eventually full time.

“It’s difficult to find someone to have a partnership with,” John says. “You

don’t know if your styles are going to clash or if you’ll get along with one another on a personal or professional basis. I felt that as Chad and I got to know one another and shared our families and faith, we developed a level of trust that’s hard to find. I trusted him 100 percent before he came to BlueWave. We’d had a line of open, honest communication established for some time, so when I saw we had

similar chair-side manners, I knew it would work.”

It works. On all levels it works. They spend family time together, they go to church together, and many mornings and weekends they surf together. While Chad is not a partner yet, John consults Chad on business decisions and calls his input “level-headed and invaluable.” They’ve filled their office with a staff that truly cares for one another, and everyone there is excited about the future of BlueWave. ■

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