

# Shawn shares his sad secret

Brother's death inspires DeLand football player, teammates



Willis family  
Shawn Willis, left, and his late brother, Josh, dressed sharp in 2002. Josh died of brain cancer Dec. 30, 2003.



Shawn Willis, center-right, huddles with some of his DeLand High School football teammates during practice this week for their state playoff game. DeLand's players are wearing decals on their helmets, "J25," in honor of Willis' late brother, Josh.

By MICHAEL LEWIS  
STAFF WRITER

**T**he "Truth Chair" was empty. Nobody seemed eager to fill it. Then 16-year-old Shawn Willis tentatively raised his hand.

It was the middle of August, and the DeLand High School football team was sitting in a dorm room in the small town of Lake Placid, a few hours south of here.

Toward the end of a preseason camp that was supposed to foster team bonding, coach Kevin Pettis asked his players to share something personal, by sitting in the "Truth Chair."

Shawn hardly knew most of these kids. He was only a junior varsity player in 2008.

So, he raised his hand, and out tumbled a story he'd been living with for more than five years.

A tale about a kid named Josh who used to sleep in the same room as Shawn, a kid with incredibly long eyelashes that all the girls marveled at. They were the two middle kids of Brenda and Shawn Willis of Deltona, and the two who were most alike.

Josh loved nothing more than football, Scooby-Doo, his dad's



**"My brother died. He was only 9. He wore No. 25 when he played football, so that's why I wear that number."**

SHAWN WILLIS  
about his brother, Josh

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macaroni and cheese, and a vanilla McFlurry shake from McDonald's.

As the room in Lake Placid grew funeral parlor-quiet, Shawn told them more.

He talked about Josh getting strangely sick in August 2001,

#### Class 6A State Semifinal

**WHAT:** DeLand (12-1) at Apopka (12-1)

**WHEN:** 7:30 tonight

**WHERE:** Apopka High School

**TICKETS:** \$8

**DIRECTIONS:** Take Interstate 4 to Exit 92 (State Road 436 west). Take S.R. 436 west for 7 miles, then turn right onto U.S. Highway 441 North (Orange Blossom Trail). Turn right onto Cabel Lane, then left onto County Road 424 (Old Dixie Highway), then right onto Vick Road, then right onto Martin Street.

**WHAT'S AT STAKE:** The winner will play in the state championship game Dec. 19 at the Florida Citrus Bowl.

and then the awful diagnosis: brain cancer. He shared with these strangers a tale about highlights and lowlights, when Josh

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michael.lewis@news-jrnl.com

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News-Journal file/SEAN McNEIL

Shawn Willis (25) gets a stiff arm in the face mask from Chevin Davis (1) as DeLand takes on Mainland in Daytona Beach on Nov. 6.

## J25 helmet stickers to honor Josh

### INSPIRES

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would get better, only to get worse soon after.

Finally, Shawn told them about saying goodbye to his favorite person in the world, as he sobbed in a hospital room in Orlando.

"My brother died," Shawn Willis told his new teammates, who fought back tears. "He was only 9. He wore No. 25 when he played football, so that's why I wear that number."

The DeLand football team is playing at Apopka in the state semifinals tonight, the first time the Bulldogs' program has ever gone this far.

When they run out onto the field, Josh Willis' memory will be with them. Attached to the back of each of their helmets is a decal reading "J25."

They do it to honor Josh. But really, it's for Shawn Willis, too, their teammate who opened his heart and let them all in.

### SHAWN AND JOSH

"We slept in the same room with bunk beds," Shawn recalled last week, in a completely calm tone. "But we always slept in the same bed."

That was Josh and Shawn. Two peas in a pod, mom Brenda recalled. Older sister Aysia, now 18, was a few years ahead of them, and little Khayleb, now 13, certainly couldn't keep up yet.

Josh and Shawn, only a year apart, "wanted to spend every minute with each other," Brenda said. "I think that's why Josh wanted to play football so badly, because Shawn did."

Josh was a typically healthy 6-year-old when, in the summer of 2001, he started getting severe headaches, and was often nauseous. The family wasn't too concerned, until one day Brenda got a call from a nurse at Sunrise Elementary, Josh's school. He'd been having trouble focusing on objects in front of him, and couldn't walk in a straight line.

The Willises took Josh to the doctor, and after a series of tests, got the terrible news: Josh was suffering from brain cancer.

Even worse, doctors said the tumor in Josh's head was inoperable.

"They were telling us this and we were in shock, but I don't think it really hit us," Brenda said. "We have such a strong family bond that we thought it was just something else we'd have to deal with."

Tiny Josh was put through chemotherapy over an eight-week period, and it seemed to work. He was able to return to school. Shawn remembered everyone at Sunrise making a big fuss over Josh, "with people being even nicer to him than they were before."

Josh was in a wheelchair now, so he couldn't play football.

But he still got to be the water boy for Shawn's team.

A year after his initial diagnosis, Josh had to have another surgery; a second shunt was put in his brain because the tumor had grown.

### A BROTHER'S LOVE

Shawn said he never got angry or questioned God about why his brother was suffering so much. He continued to believe Josh was going to get better. Wasn't he still telling the same silly jokes, and giving his family a "thumbs-up" to say he was doing OK?

Josh's cancer got worse in 2003, though. He was relegated to living in a special bed installed in the family's living room on Ryan Lane in Deltona, and had to be fed through a tube.

Every day after school in the fall of '03, Shawn would come home and tell his brother everything, while rubbing his muscles, or doing whatever he could to make his buddy feel just a little bit better.

A few days after Christmas, Josh suffered a seizure. He was rushed to Florida Fish Memorial Hospital, then taken to Orlando's Florida Hospital. Shawn didn't see him for a few days.

"I was so scared that the last time I'd see him was in that ambulance," Shawn said.

On Dec. 30, with the family gathered around Josh's bed, the doctors told Brenda and Shawn Sr. there was nothing else they could do for Josh. They wanted to disconnect his life support.

Shawn said goodbye, then dropped to his knees and cried harder than ever, as his grandparents told him that Josh had gone to be with the Lord.

Josh died that night.

Shawn Sr.'s wedding anniversary

sary.

### MEMORIES

June 8 is Josh's birthday. Every year on that day, the Willis family writes a message to their son on a balloon, then releases it into the sky.

Most years, they go to McDonald's, too, where Shawn always orders a McFlurry.

"I used to hate them, you know, before . . .," Shawn said. "Now I love them."

After a short period of not wanting to talk about Josh, Shawn has always been open about discussing his brother. Still, Brenda was a little surprised he told the football team about his pain.

"I just figured, this is my family now, so they might as well know," Shawn said.

Coach Kevin Pettis said he and the team were so moved by Shawn's courage, they wanted to find a way to honor Josh this season.

"It was such a touching story, and Shawn's just a great, great kid," DeLand running back Shontrelle Johnson said. "Anything we could do, we wanted to do."

Pettis approached Brenda and Shawn Sr. about putting a sticker on the team's helmets.

"I was overwhelmed," Brenda recalled, her voice shaking a little for the first time. "I was crying, and my husband was amazed, too."

Shawn Willis, a rapidly improving defensive back for DeLand, thinks about his brother before every game, saying a prayer and talking to Josh in the locker room. He says Josh's name to himself in the huddle before every play, too.

He thinks sometimes about what should've been; Shawn and Josh, starring for the team and experiencing so many things together: high school, dating, the SATs.

But Shawn is a remarkably mature kid, and he knows, thanks in part to his team's loving gesture, that Josh is always nearby.

"It's the best feeling in the world, knowing my team wanted to do this for me and that they're a part of my life," Shawn said. "It's indescribable. They didn't know (Josh), but they wanted to honor him."

"When coach Pettis said that

DeLand is a well-rounded valuation Joss is a part of our team now, I just felt so, so wonderful."