



ANCHORAGE, Alaska – Steve and Harrison Murphy enjoy a number of outdoor activities together and camp on a regular basis. This trip took them to Crystal Creek in November of 2006 where they fished for Dolly Varden. (Photo courtesy of Steve Murphy.)

## Meet Harrison James Murphy

Story by PA1 Sara Francis

In the Coast Guard the concept of family goes beyond the traditional bonds between parents and children as individuals are separated from loved ones by deployments, reassignment to locations around the world and often miles of open ocean. In these situations individuals redefine family and rely on those close to them for support.

It is this concept of family that allowed one Alaska based Coast Guardsman to understand the needs of a young boy after his mother died of cancer and he was left without parents.

It was in the wake of tragedy that a new family was created, not on the traditional foundation, but on the bonds forged between a Coast Guardsman and a boy who first knew him as a friend and eventually came to call him dad.

Three months ago nine year old Harrison James Murphy lost his mother to cancer. Despite his loss Harrison acts like any boy of his age. He loves the outdoors; running and likes to build things with his hands. An interest in airplanes has given way to a dream to be a fighter pilot this week. Although losing ones only parent may seem lonely and devastating, he was far from alone through his ordeal. Five years ago Harrison was introduced to Steve Murphy through the Big Brothers, Big Sisters program. That initial meeting eventually spurred a lifelong relationship leading Murphy to support him through the anticipated death of his mother and finally adopt him last month.

Murphy is a civilian Coast Guard employee and Coast Guard reservist of 29 years.

His relationship with Harrison began in November of 2005, when he decided to donate some of his time to the community by participating in the Big Brothers, Big Sisters program.

Murphy leads an already active life filled with running, bicycling, cross-country skiing, and ice climbing; sometimes for days at a time. For Murphy being a Big Brother was just another part of his active life.

The process of becoming a Big Brother begins by conducting an interview with one of the program's counselors and describing your interests and what you have to offer a child. After Murphy met with the counselor and explained his lifestyle, they quickly knew he and Harrison would be a good match.

At that time Harrison's mother was battling cancer, and he spent time then with his mother's grown daughters who were like aunts to him. They had school age children who were slightly older than he was. He also spent time with friends and with Murphy, through the Big Brothers program.



ANCHORAGE, Alaska – Harrison, 9, and Steve Murphy became father and son August 8, 2007 following a hearing at the State of Alaska Courthouse in Anchorage. Harrison recently lost his mother to cancer and with her permission Steve adopted him. Harrison and Steve met through the Big Brothers, Big Sisters program in 2005. (Official Coast Guard photo by Petty Officer Sara Francis.)



ANCHORAGE, Alaska – Harrison and Steve's passion for the outdoors is not limited by Alaska's cold winters. In February they trekked many miles to Barber Cabin using snowshoes and cross country skis. Harrison, shown here in his winter gear, enjoyed the trip and was thrilled with the lunch they caught and roasted. (Photos courtesy of Steve Murphy.)

The program requests a volunteer spend time with a child at least once a week, but Murphy and Harrison spent time together twice and sometimes three times a week. They would spend a few hours or a whole day together. They spent a lot of time outdoors and Harrison really enjoyed being with someone focused on him.

"Big brothers, Big Sisters is a fantastic program provided you are well matched with your particular child," Murphy explained. "Giving time to one individual can make all the difference in someone's life, even on a part-time basis."

When Mindy's cancer returned she tried chemotherapy treatment again. The doctors found cancer in new areas of her body indicating it was spreading. In the spring of 2007, before undergoing the final of three treatments, Harrison's mother realized that she needed to find some more permanent arrangements for Harrison..

Murphy, understanding the severity of the situation approached Mindy with the idea of adopting Harrison.

"With both aunts in the area Harrison definitely had choices, but they have children of their own to think about," Murphy said. "Given the history Harrison had of changing houses during his mother's battle with cancer, I thought I could offer some stability, some normalcy for him."

After discussing the idea with Harrison's mother she accepted the idea. As it turns out, she had had the same thought and was trying to decide how to approach Murphy, he explained. Harrison's mother passed away on Mother's Day, which subsequently was the day Murphy became Harrison's custodian. A formal custody hearing would take place in August.

At first Harrison was a little scared, Murphy noted. He was with her when she passed and he was fully aware of her illness. He loved his mother very much. He would wake up after having bad dreams but that's to be expected, Murphy recalled.

On August 8, 2007 the adoption hearing took place at the State of Alaska Court in Anchorage. Typically adoptees do not attend the proceedings, but Harrison requested to be present and was allowed to do so by the judge.

"He was dressed in a black suit and wore his sun glasses," Murphy recalled. "He looked like a little FBI agent."

In the courtroom there were only two chairs at the table for Murphy and the lawyer, so Harrison sat in the defendant's chair. After the particulars were discussed the judge allowed Harrison to make a statement. This is also highly unusual but Harrison made a formal request to the Master of the Court.

"When the judge addressed him it took him a minute to respond," Murphy said. "When he did he said 'your honor I really like living at Steve's house and I want to be able to call him Dad.'"

The judge explained that if accepted, Murphy would be able to send him to bed and make him clean his room, all the things a dad does. Harrison explained that he understood and so became Harrison James Murphy.

It has been three months since the passing of his mother and the newly formed Murphy family is doing well. In a couple of weeks Harrison will start 4th Grade at Kasuun Elementary. Harrison has been a good student, although, he does not look forward to giving up his summer. It's been filled with summer camp, hiking, camping, sailing and fishing. Harrison still sees his aunts, nieces and nephews and he has begun to meet his new father's family who are all very supportive of the adoption.

"Harrison is a wonderful kid," said Murphy. "Kind, well mannered, obedient and extremely fit."

Being a father is an ongoing adaptation for Murphy who explained that he does miss the days when he could get off work and bike to Seward or go backpacking from Eagle River to Girdwood.

"I still do those things but the intensity is at a nine year-old level," Murphy said. "I've had a great life and I felt like I was in a position now where I could put someone else first. There is not a moment in my mind when Harrison isn't first."

Although Harrison is the epitome of a happy adolescent, Murphy understands the challenges that lay ahead in raising a son who will never forget the loss of his mother.

Last weekend was Harrison's ninth birthday. There was a soldier theme and friends and neighbors joined to celebrate. Balloons were blown up, a camouflage tent was erected in the back yard and the boys donned uniforms and face paint. There were marshmallow wars and an obstacle course in flight suits and oversized boots. An awards ceremony followed and all the boys saluted. As he was surrounded by people who we know do not fit the formal definition of family, it would be obvious to anyone watching that they were in fact just that.