"Jeremy's Son"

Caption (25 words): "Jeremy's Son" shares my experience working as a care attendant for a person with a disability, celebrating the friendship, compassion, and wisdom gained through diversity.

Essay (463 words):

"Did I tell you, he's my son?" Jeremy* asks the surgeon, his eyes drifting in and out of a post-operative haze. We are in the outpatient surgical center, and Jeremy's doctor is about to discuss the results of his surgery. The surgeon looks surprised, at best confused, by my presence. After all, we look nothing alike. Jeremy is a tall, Caucasian gentleman from the Midwest and I am a young, sprightly Asian-American from California. The situation is further confounded by the fact that Jeremy is also unmarried and gay. Perhaps I am adopted. The doctor begins to call me back into the room before Jeremy breaks the awkward silence with his laughter, letting the surgeon know that I am simply his caretaker, and no, we are not related. One would think hearing the results of a cancer biopsy would be a bad time to prank your doctor.

Jeremy loved challenging people's assumptions by turning them upside down. He was a quadriplegic, and during my years as his care attendant, our friendship grew and deepened despite our apparent differences. Despite gaps in age, sexuality, and cultural identity, we had deep discussions on technology, musical theater, and the nature of spirituality. We also shared a mischievous sense of humor and a mutual desire to understand and learn from each other. As I cared for him, he fueled my interest in medicine by describing his experiences with the oncologists at UCSF, his constant battle with insurance companies, and most importantly, his perspective as a patient. In those moments, it was no surprise that I was by his bedside, holding his hand to comfort him as he faced the grim reality of his illness.

As Jeremy's health continued to decline, I was there for him as both a caretaker and an advocate. He passed away several months later. Afterwards, I applied to medical school while continuing to work as an assistant in a UCSF cadaver lab. As I prepare to matriculate as a first-year medical student, I am reminded of how Jeremy shaped my values as a
future physician. Diversity is a requirement of the modern health care practitioner. Our communities are no longer as homogeneous as once assumed, a fact that is reflected in the complicated politics of our time. UCSF is unique in this regard; it serves as one of the most innovative health care systems in one of the most economically and socially diverse cities in the world. It is necessary for us to learn from and understand the differing perspectives of our patients if we are to adequately treat and advocate for our communities. My friendship with Jeremy was a celebration of diversity, its challenges, and the gift of wisdom gained by learning to forget my assumptions about others.

*Name changed to protect patient privacy.*