Teenage Chef Ben Watkins Dies of Rare Cancer

Watkins, whose culinary talents earned him a spot on “MasterChef Junior,” was just 14.

November 25, 2020 By Caroline Tien

Culinary wunderkind Ben Watkins, who appeared on the sixth season of Fox’s MasterChef Junior when he was just 11 years old, died of a rare form of cancer November 16 at age 14. The news was reported by People and The New York Times, among other outlets.

Once news of Watkins’s death broke, the show’s host, celebrity chef Gordon Ramsay, paid tribute to Watkins on Twitter, writing, “Ben, you were an incredibly talented home cook and even stronger young man. Your young life had so many tough turns but you always persevered.”

> We lost a Master of the @MasterChefJrFOX kitchen today. Ben you were an incredibly talented home cook and even stronger young man. Your young life had so many tough turns but you always persevered. Sending all the love to Ben Watkins’ family with this terrible loss Gx pic.twitter.com/RX81hP7lbw
>
> — Gordon Ramsay (@GordonRamsay) November 17, 2020

In 2019, when Watkins was 13, he was diagnosed with angiomatoid fibrous histiocytoma, a soft-tissue tumor most commonly seen in children, adolescents and young adults. Doctors initially mischaracterized the “golf-ball-sized growth” on Watkins’s neck as malformed lymph nodes, his

uncle Anthony Edwards told the Chicago Tribune. Despite chemotherapy treatment, Watkins succumbed to the disease after a lengthy stint at Lurie Children's Hospital of Chicago, according to ABC.

In a statement posted on a GoFundMe page titled "Love4Ben Memorial Fund," Edwards and his grandmother Donna, who, along with Edwards, became Watkins's legal guardian following the death of both of his parents, remembered the teenager's resilience.

"Ben was and will always be the strongest person we know. When Ben's rare illness was shared with the world, he was so heartened by the outpouring of love he received from every corner of the globe—especially here in his hometown of Gary, Indiana. We cannot thank this community enough for holding our family up in prayer and for all that you've done," they wrote.

In his 14 years, Watkins experienced far more than his fair share of trauma. In September 2017, Watkins's father, restaurateur Michael Watkins, fatally shot Watkins's mother, artist and jeweler Leila Edwards, before turning the gun on himself in a gruesome murder-suicide covered widely by the local media. The crime took place shortly after Watkins finished filming season 6 of MasterChef Junior, in which the 11-year-old was one of 40 kids between ages 8 and 13 to compete in the cooking competition show.

On the show, Watkins's tragic backstory earned him many fans, as did his ability to put together a peach cobbler piled high with whipped cream and drizzled with caramel sauce. He came by his love of cooking through his early experiences manning the cash register, waiting tables and selling homemade baked goods at his father's Chicago restaurant, Big Ben's Bodacious Barbecue & Deli.

Big Ben's, according to the Times, was named after Watkins himself.

To read more about cancer in children who have survived traumatic events, click here. And to read about how cancer is disproportionately fatal in children of color, click here and click here.

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