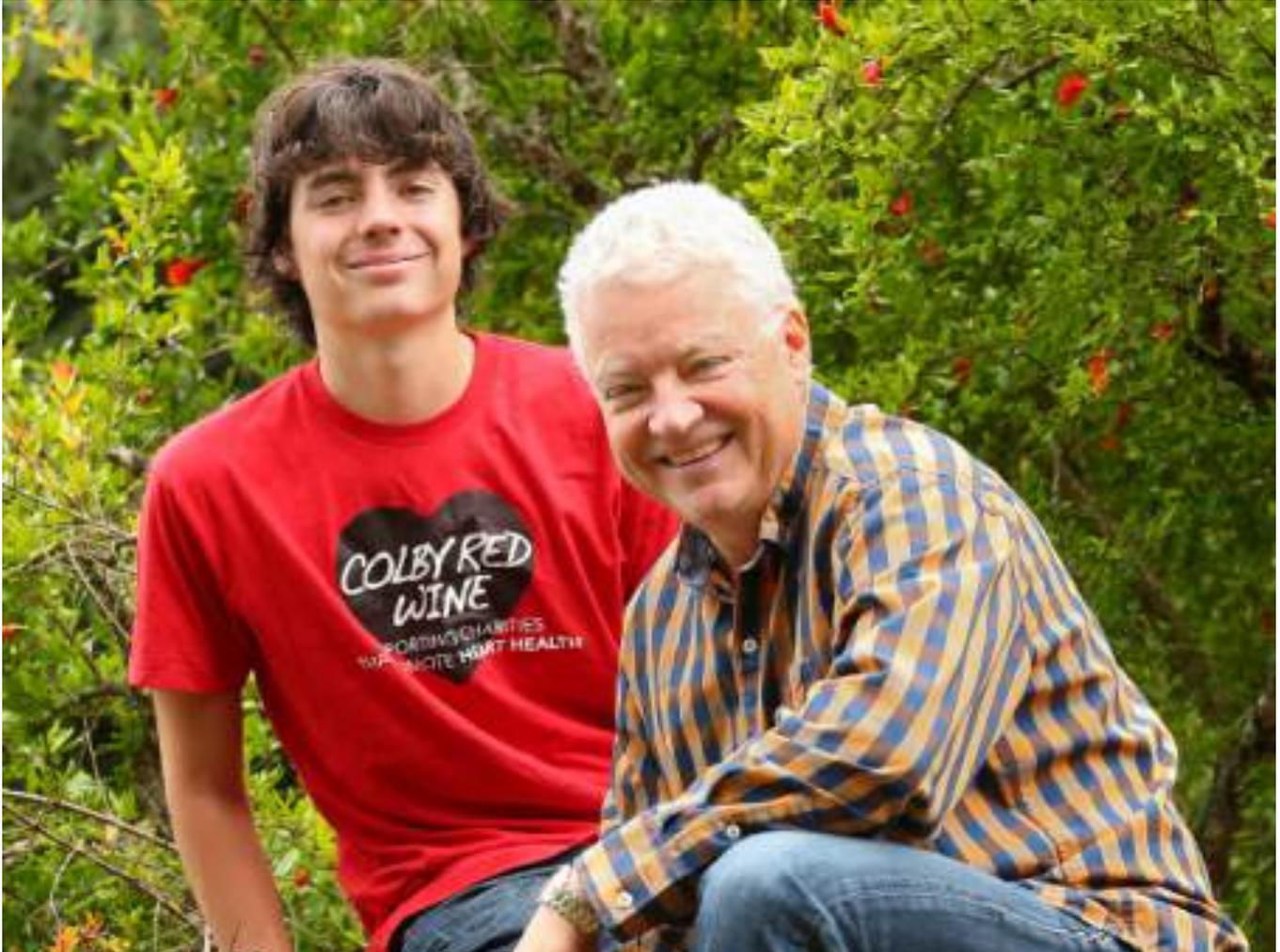


Cardinal Newman senior puts heart into charity



Colby Groom has successfully raised over half a million dollars supporting charities that promote heart health, with the help of his winemaker father Daryl Groom, with Colby Red wine.
(Christopher Chung/ The Press Democrat)

Seventeen-year-old Colby Groom has a great head start on his senior service project at Cardinal Newman High School in Santa Rosa, and there's a compelling reason why.

The Healdsburg teen has become a national face of childhood heart disease, serving as a spokesman for the Children's Heart Foundation and raising more than \$610,000 for the fight against heart disease with the sales of Colby Red wine produced by his father.

Closer to home, his parents are cheering Colby as he teaches students at high schools throughout the county how to save lives with hands-only CPR lessons.

"The need is there," Lisa Groom said of her son's service project. She and her husband, eight-time Winemaker of the Year Daryl Groom, know too well the fragile nature of life.

Born with congenital heart disease, Colby was just an infant when doctors detected a heart murmur. He underwent two open-heart surgeries at ages 9 and 10 to repair a faulty heart valve. He endured a long recovery away from school. Despite the love and support of his parents, three older sisters and a multitude of extended family and friends, Colby was overwhelmed.

"I was depressed," he said. "I just wanted to go live my life."

His parents encouraged him to reach out to others. He participated in Heart Walk events and helped out with his sister's senior-year American Heart Association fundraiser by setting up a tent and putting himself on display. He raised \$1,000 charging \$1 to see his scar, \$5 to listen to his mechanical heart valve and "more" to touch the scar.

"Just whatever we could do to get money," he said.

Colby pondered his experiences as a heart patient and thought repeatedly of other kids who would enter operating rooms as he had, consumed with fear and uncertainty.

At 11, while his father watched a football game on TV, Colby presented an idea. How about making a special wine together?

“Colby was persistent that day,” his father said. “He waited until halftime to present his case.”

Initially distracted by the game, Daryl Groom, 56, considered the request and began working on the first batch in the basement cellar of another winemaking family, the Seghe-sios. Colby helped by mashing and stirring grapes, and checking temperatures, yeast and alcohol levels.

The effort “was like a call to action for Daryl and I to support,” said Lisa Groom, 52, something they expected to be a one-time production for friends.

Things took off after Walgreens got word and offered to carry Colby Red, which typically retails for \$11.99. Just after the wine launch in early 2011, the Grooms were invited to New York City for a segment on the “Today” show, giving national exposure to their cause.

Colby points to his father as his inspiration, and he credits his parents’ support and encouragement with the wildly successful project that also lifted Colby’s spirits, confidence and sense of accomplishment.

“They played a huge role in Colby Red. It wouldn’t be possible without them and without my father’s expertise,” Colby said. “It’s probably what they spend the most of their time on. I’m blessed every day to have parents like them who would do that.”

The Grooms now produce 25,000 cases of Colby Red annually and hope their fundraising effort will soon top \$1 million.

Colby calls his namesake wine “delicious,” but says it’s not just the wine that consumers buy.

“There are a lot of good bottles of wine on the market, but what people hopefully see when they look at Colby Red is the story,” he said.

While true for the first bottle, his mother says the flavorful California cuvee brings buyers back for more. “With all the other bottles, it’s because you love the wine,” she said.

Colby attends three or four national fundraising galas each year, sharing his story with crowds that sometimes exceed 1,000 people. He also gives TV, radio and print interviews and delivers speeches so heartfelt and compelling that special-appeal donations often double when he is present, his parents say.

There have been some memorable perks for the teen. Colby threw the first pitch at a Chicago Cubs game at Wrigley Field, drove a Maserati through the snowy streets of Denver and is looking forward to flying in a fighter jet, all because donors were moved by his speeches and philanthropy. He also got to meet rapper MC Hammer.

“People come up and say, ‘You know your son’s an inspiration to us. He gives us hope,’” Daryl Groom said.

Colby’s parents are careful not to overbook their son, who rarely has a spare minute.

He maintains a high grade point average taking Advanced Placement and Honors classes at Cardinal Newman, plays on the varsity tennis team, is a 4-H Club member, works as a busboy at Baci Café in Healdsburg and is part of the special events staff at Francis Ford Coppola Winery in Geyserville.

He has a girlfriend, too, even forgoing an American Heart Association gala in Chicago to attend her prom. Fundraising events usually take priority, with Colby traveling to the Charlotte Heart Ball in North Carolina on his 17th birthday in February, simply telling his father, “Dad, that’s just what we do.”

As a national spokesman for the Children’s Heart Foundation, Colby will write a quarterly newsletter, speak at two different events per year “and give them a large check,” he said.

His biggest rewards come from reaching out to other kids with heart disease, Colby said. He spoke with two boys long distance, an 8-year-old in Georgia and a 17-year-old in Los Angeles, who were terrified about their pending heart surgeries.

Colby calmed their nerves and offered his encouragement, just as he did at a Valentine’s Day party, held at an intensive care unit at UC Davis Children’s Hospital.

“It was just indescribable what I felt. I rediscovered why I want to help with Colby Red,” he said. “I just wanted to help them so much. I don’t want them to go through what I went through.”

For more information, visit colbyred.com or [facebook.com/ colbyredwine](https://www.facebook.com/colbyredwine).