

# MORT *the Mormon*

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When you're six-foot-seven and tower over all your high-school friends, it's easy to be noticed. When you're marching in a band, pounding on drums, you tend to attract a fair amount of attention. When you're one of only a few members of the Church in your entire school, you stand out even more. Such is the lot of Ryan Mortimer of the Kettle Moraine Ward in the Milwaukee Wisconsin South Stake, or Mort as his friends call him—a moniker that has morphed into Mort the Mormon to most of his classmates. "Friends come up to me all the time with questions they have about the Church. They'll say, 'Hey, Mort, what's this all about?' Or 'I saw some of your missionaries the other day,' and I'll say, 'I'm going to be one of those guys in a couple years.'"

Most of the time Ryan likes being the guy with a reputation.

"At my high school people know how I'm going to act and how I'm not going to act, what I'm going to say and what I'm not going to say. They know because of a lot of repetition. You have to keep doing the same things over and over again. You have to watch your language, watch the jokes you tell, you have to act a

*Ryan Mortimer's religion means that, compared to his bandmates and classmates, he marches to the beat of a different drum.*



certain way and present yourself in the way an LDS person would present themselves, and you have to keep doing it over a period of years. It's nice to know I've kept that reputation."

But sometimes the pressure of always being the example—of always being the "good" guy, especially when there are those around you trying to make you slip up, can become overwhelming. That's what happened to Ryan when he was traveling with his marching band. "Sometimes I get made fun of a lot because I don't swear or tell dirty jokes. I've actually had people say they were going to get me to crack before the end of the band season."





### The Breaking Point

At one point about two years ago during an extended band competition, the harassment got so bad that Ryan reached a breaking point. “I was crying on the bus. I just couldn’t handle it anymore. I didn’t want to be there anymore. I wanted to go home.” When the bus arrived back at the school where the band was staying, Ryan told a friend he was going for a walk and left to find a quiet place to pray.

“I found this spot behind the school, and when I knelt down and started to pray, I broke down. I’ve never cried so hard in my life. I just didn’t know what to do. I didn’t know how to get through this. I must have prayed for a good 30 minutes where

I was literally pouring out my soul. It was really the first night where I felt as if Heavenly Father was near to me. When

I felt that, I’ve never felt so much at peace in my life, and I knew right then that

I would get through this.

“Before I prayed

I was like, ‘I can’t take it,’



PHOTOGRAPHS BY PAUL VANDENBERGHE, COURTESY OF THE MORTIMER FAMILY, AND © GETTY IMAGES





**S**tanding tall is part of life for Ryan, who is six-foot-seven (2 m) and often placed in situations where he must explain and defend his beliefs. Prayer has often been a strength to him, and he also finds comfort in the scriptures.

and afterward it was one of the most calm and peaceful feelings I've ever felt. Then there were tears of joy and tears of happiness. What I felt was truly the gift of the Holy Ghost helping me get through what I was going through."

Ryan says that as he felt the loving presence of his Father in Heaven, everything changed. Ryan had felt alone and insignificant; now he felt loved and empowered. "I'm a son of God," Ryan said to himself. "I'm a priesthood holder—a priest in the Aaronic Priesthood. That night I really felt like I was someone important to my Heavenly Father."

### A Chance to Share

"The interesting thing about that is that same night one of the girls who I never would have thought would be interested in the Church came up to me and said, 'How can you handle that?'" She told Ryan she had noticed that he was different and asked what it was that made him act the way he did. They ended up talking about the Church for two hours, with Ryan sharing scriptures and his testimony with her.

The very next day, the band was traveling on a small ship on Lake Michigan. Ryan was in the "quiet" room reading *Jesus the Christ*, cross-referencing passages with his scriptures, when one of the band directors came in carrying his own Bible. "We talked for about three hours about the differences in our religions and about the Book of Mormon," says Ryan. "I bore my testimony to him and talked about Joseph Smith's First Vision." After those three hours, Ryan's director said, "I'm very surprised at how well you know your church and your faith. It's nice to see a 17-year-old with such a testimony of his church."

The competition circuit continued for another week, and those who had been badgering Ryan stopped. He'd weathered the storm, his testimony now strengthened, his reputation intact. Plus he'd had a few opportunities to share the gospel with others.

### I Am Not Ashamed

One of Ryan's favorite scriptures is Romans 1:16, which reads, "For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ: for it is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth."

"The reason it's one of my favorite scriptures," says Ryan, "is because I'm not ashamed to say who I am, I am not ashamed to be who I am, and I'm not ashamed to say what I know."

So that's how it is to be known as Mort the Mormon. Ryan has spent years being an example of the believers and gaining the respect of his bandmates and classmates. He likes knowing that his friends know what he stands for and why he acts the way he does. It's not always easy being the one who's noticed when everyone's expectations are so high. But that's just who Ryan is: he's a big guy, and he's tall enough to stand that high. **NE**

