

Kelly

Cancer Comes a Knocking

The day I found out will be etched in my memory forever. Those first couple of days in the hospital felt surreal. I felt helpless and scared, but strangely hopeful. I was scared to be alone. I was scared that I might not wake up as the same person. However, I had already become a different person. Just how different I would not learn until later. Cancer had knocked down my door and made itself right at home. January 24th 2007 was the day cancer came into my life. September 24th 2007 was the day I said goodbye.

The Girl Behind the Veil

Kelly was at first glance an extremely healthy 30 year old female. She was a middle school teacher who loved to exercise and had a passion for outdoor activities, crafts, and her family. She was someone I looked up to and wanted to be like. She was carefree and fearless and had an insatiable love for life. More importantly, she was my sister. It was unthinkable that she would be anything but okay and that we would continue to spend many years laughing and loving life together with our families.

I called my sister to say hello as we so often did. We never talked about much on the phone, but it always made me feel closer to her since she was in San Diego and I was up north. This phone call was not like the others though. Kelly was not her normal bubbly self. She was tired and not feeling well. She was headed to the doctor because she was having really bad stomach pains. I told her to feel better and that I was thinking about her. I went to bed nervous, but with a naive faith that everything was going to be fine.

This Can't be Happening

My dad was on business in Southern California and my mom had just arrived in Hawaii for an out of the ordinary ladies getaway, and holding down the fort at home was my brother, his family, and myself. Spread out all over the place we all woke up very early January 24th to a phone call from my dad informing us Kelly was going into surgery. The doctors had run numerous tests throughout the night to find out Kelly had a large cyst on her ovary. They immediately scheduled her for a routine ovarian cyst removal. I sat on my bed for bit while I took in the news and then like every other day got ready for work. I continued to check in with my dad who was at that point well on his way to meeting Kelly and her husband at the hospital. He was able to get there before she went into surgery to give her a hug and a kiss for all of us. I felt comfort in knowing that he was there.

I was agitated at work and could not stop thinking about my sister. For my entire life she was the one that looked out for me and took care of me and filled in when my brother was away at college. She was my best friend and my other half. So needless to say, I was anxious to hear how the surgery was going. I received a call from my dad who was audibly distraught and panicked. He had called me by mistake. He had been trying to get a hold of my mom and could not remember her phone number. Mind you, we have all had the same phone numbers for years.

This was not normal. He told me in a rushed scared voice that my brother would call me, but that we needed to get down to San Diego as soon as possible, something was wrong. The words stung like a knife in my heart.

Not knowing what else to do, I rushed to my brother's house to find out what was going on. Like the good brother he is he tried to remain calm, while visibly shaken, as he told me the news. "Kelly has ovarian cancer" was all he could get out. My brother doesn't cry often and I have never seen an ounce of fear on his face. At that moment he was not only crying but had a look of sheer terror on his face.

The Whole World in Her Hands

We pulled into the hospital parking lot in San Diego at 12:30am after a long and anxious car ride from Marin with a stop in LA to pick up my mom from the airport. The smell of the hospital made my stomach turn. It was dark and silent as we arrived. It was well beyond visiting hours, but given that a 30 year old female had just been admitted with stage 3C Ovarian Cancer, the nurses were very accommodating. Feeling nauseous and scared we entered Kelly's hospital room. I was holding my mom's hand like a child, probably squeezing the life out of it. My dad was sitting with Kelly when we arrived. She was drugged up, but very happy to see us. She started to cry and just wanted to hold our hands. I gave her a hug and told her I loved her.

Kelly didn't want to be alone so my brother offered to stay with her. "Am I going to die?", Kelly asked him during the night. She was afraid that she wasn't going to make it through the night. I have no idea to this day how my brother handled that question. All I know is that he held her hand and just sat with her the entire night. I still find comfort in knowing that she wasn't alone that night.

The next nine months would prove to be the most trying time of my family's life.

Happy New Year

Tahoe has always been a special place for our family. We would spend holidays and various weekends in the mountains. So many good memories came out of those trips. There was the day that my brother lost his ski on the chairlift after Kelly nudged him. He was no doubt wearing jeans and a pair of Vuarnet's. There was the time Kelly forgot to get off the chairlift and had to jump off. Real safe looking back on that one. There were the all family snow shoe trips in the middle of the white forest and awesome sledding runs that just made you smile and laugh. There were the endless snowball fights that always ended up in tears and wet underwear. As adults we continued with the games, but perhaps became a little more aware of waterproof ski pants and proper snow equipment.

Three weeks before Kelly was diagnosed we had spent a few days in the snow. After arriving a massive snow fall blanketed the area. We took walks as a family, went sledding, and played some great snow football. It was a great Tahoe experience despite Kelly feeling a little under the weather. It would turn out to be our last holiday all together in Tahoe. Stevie the snowman

turned out to be one incredible memory for all of us. We continue to make new memories in Tahoe always keeping Kelly in our hearts as we shove snow in each others faces.

Bags of Peanuts

I spent many a weekend traveling back and forth from San Diego. I put my life on hold at home to put my energy into more pressing matters. It was the only way I could cope. Those crazy chaotic months led to some pretty interesting learning experiences. Most of which were quite positive. I learned how to pack light when traveling. Something that would prove very useful when traveling abroad later. I learned that Southwest peanut packs can save you from hunger after hikes longer than anticipated. I learned the joy of visiting with the people I care about on free earned miles. I learned that children have no concept of time when going to the bathroom in airports and that it is possible for a kid to forget to wipe because they are so lost in their own world. Yes, unfortunately that experience is a sad but true story that can only be told through smiles and laughter.

There were many lessons I learned in my travels back and forth from seeing my sister. It is the insignificant things that made me smile and feel sane. I think what I learned most is that life can change in an instant so appreciate what you have and make the most of it. I am not the seize the day type though. For me, making the most of life means laughing at stupid jokes, enjoying a sunny day eating airplane peanuts, or feeling cozy on a cloudy day. There is so much in my life to be thankful for everyday. I learned that having the courage to accept what life hands you no matter how good or bad is something to be proud of. It isn't always easy, but that is something that helped me through those tough nine months and continues to help me as I journey through life without my sister by my side.

Five Years Goes By In a Flash

It is hard to believe that in less than a year we will be celebrating the fifth anniversary of my sister's passing. It seems like just yesterday I was sneaking in her room and reading her secret stash of notes from her friends. At the same time a lot has happened in those five years.

While Kelly was sick and after she died, our family, friends, and community took it upon themselves to support us in every way possible. I needed them like I have never needed people before in my life. It was reassuring to know though that I had a huge safety net in our support system. People stepped in to help us financially, emotionally, physically, and more. Words cannot describe the generosity we experienced.

I couldn't help but feel hopeful during all that time despite the bleak forecast. After Kelly died all of my family, myself included felt compelled to give back to the people who had helped us through our most difficult life experience yet. We started a foundation in Kelly's honor, Kelly's Wishes Foundation. The purpose of the foundation is to support causes that Kelly would have supported.

Kelly's Wishes Foundation holds an annual fundraising walk around Kelly's birthday to not only remember the incredible person she was, but also to shed light on the many areas of the community that need help. The walk has become a very therapeutic event for me. The first year was tough emotionally as we prepared for the event. However, the outpouring of love for Kelly, our family and the community at large was something we all very much needed to get through the grieving process. People from all parts of our lives converged to share stories about Kelly and just enjoy each others company. It is an event that we look forward to and cherish every year. Kelly would have loved to be a part of this and I have no doubt that she joins us in her own way every year.

Lost but Never Gone

I think about Kelly everyday. I welcome and am comforted when I see her in my dreams. She may not be with us physically but she is with me all the time. Despite the pain and suffering that still exists I feel lucky to have had Kelly in my life for as long as I did. As I said before I have accepted that my life story now includes a tragic loss, but I try not to let that define who I am anymore. It takes so much energy to be sad and angry. I get so much more satisfaction in taking each day as they come and enjoying what I have been able to experience in my lifetime. Finding that peace makes me realize that Kelly is never lost. She can be found in everything I do in life as she will forever be a part of who I am and who I become.