



# Stories from the Valley

Surviving the path of grief and  
loss after losing a child...

Todd Nigro

## *Introduction*

# **Stories from the Valley**

Surviving the path of grief and loss after losing a child...

Death is a difficult subject. Most of us don't want to talk, read, or think about it. Of course, we will all be touched by grief and loss. Maybe you already have and that is why you are reading this.

Everyone grieves differently. Some find inspiration in seeing how others have worked through their grief. Others may find this booklet entirely depressing. Either way, know that your way of grieving is just that – a unique experience for you, a path that only you can walk.

Life involves many obstacles. Some of us having bigger obstacles placed in our path. The authors of the stories in this book are “overcomers”. Despite having different circumstances, they have all experienced tragedy and found a way through their valley of grief.

There is a common theme – serving others and faith in God. Many have found a way to channel their energy in positive ways. It seems that finding a way to give through suffering is incredibly helpful.

We are Todd and Kristen Nigro, founders of Ellie's Way. We created this booklet to provide understanding, encouragement, comfort, and hope.

We have also walked a difficult path. On January 20, 2012, we lost our daughter Ellie in a tragic accident. She was six years old, a sweet little daddy's girl, and our only daughter.

We have survived the past few years with help of many of the authors of these stories. We sincerely hope that you find this booklet helpful.

God Bless,

Todd and Kristen Nigro  
Founders and Directors of Ellie's Way, Inc.

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## Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the authors for sharing their stories. Their willingness to help those that follow is inspiring.

We thank God for the wonderful gift of life.

Todd and Kristen

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EDITOR: Todd Nigro

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[www.ElliesWay.org](http://www.ElliesWay.org)

Ellie's Way's mission is to organize, maximize, and deliver assistance to people affected by tragedies.

Ellie was a precious six-year-old girl that was killed in a tragic accident in January 2012. She was full of life, loved God, and loved people. Everywhere she went she made friends and shared her sweet personality. We thank God for the gift that Ellie was in our lives, and we hope to honor her memory through Ellie's Way.

### **Resources on Ellie's Way**

Our website has many resources that you may find helpful:

- Websites and blogs
- Information for newly bereaved parents
- Comforting poems, stories, quotes, and music

[www.ElliesWay.org/resources](http://www.ElliesWay.org/resources)

### **Ellie's Way Care Packages**

We created a customized care package for parents that have lost a child that includes beautiful images, encouraging words, books, music, support group information, and customized jewelry.

[www.ElliesWay.org/carepackages](http://www.ElliesWay.org/carepackages)

# Lessons from Tragedy

by Leslie Wachter McDonald



**The McDonald Family**

On March 22, 2011, my family was on Spring Break vacation in Durango, CO. We were returning from a day of exploring when we were hit drivers side to drivers side, head on, by a retired police officer who was high on prescription medications. The accident resulted in the death of my husband, Robert, and 10 year old son, Jaden.

I was knocked unconscious and awoke to my 12 year old son, Kellen, yelling at me. We were able to exit the car even though it was fully engulfed in flames. At the scene of the accident, I kept pleading for people to get Jaden and Bob out of the car. Finally, a brave bystander who had talked to me through the flames pointed at my cross and

asked me, “Do you believe in God?” I responded, “Yes.” He responded, “They are in a better place.”

Later when they had me in the ambulance, I could hear the helicopters and chatter from the paramedics on their radios. The hard second confirmation came in that moment. One of the paramedics said, “Three dead on scene and two survivors.” The final confirmation came when they woke me up from my medically induced coma and my mom told me yet again that my son and husband were indeed gone.

Kellen and I were burned over 50% of our bodies. Kellen was transported to the burn unit at the University of Utah in Salt Lake City. I had internal injuries that needed immediate attention. Therefore, I was transferred to the University of New Mexico in Albuquerque. We spent over two months apart enduring painful skin grafts, surgeries, infections and rehabilitation in separate burn units. On rare days, when we weren’t in surgery or recovering from surgery, we would talk on the phone or Skype.

We were eventually reunited in Denver. I wound up at the University of Colorado Hospital and Kellen at Children’s of Colorado. Now we were only separated by about a half mile. We spent another month and a half healing and getting stronger in rehab until released to go home to start our new life.

### **What do you want everyone to remember about your husband and son, Jaden?**

Bob was a great man of great integrity. Family always came first. He sacrificed so much during his life to always do the right thing. He had opportunities to follow his passion, Southwest Plains Archaeology, but instead found

a family friendly career path that allowed him to take sick days with his kids and vacation time when his mom came to town. He advanced in a career that was not what he went to school for or dreamed about doing. But, like everything else, he excelled. He sang beautifully. He took stunning photos. He coached Little League. He loved to cook as much as he loved to watch the Broncos play. However, his single greatest joy was his kids! He never wanted his kids to grow up without a dad like he did.



### **Jaden Arthur McDonald**

October 4, 2000 – March 22, 2011

Jaden was born with a heart defect called a coarctation. He went into congestive heart failure a few hours after he was born. He was diagnosed and transferred to Denver Children's for heart surgery when he was just 4 days old. We always said that even though he didn't remember any of that, it molded who he was. Jaden loved life. If there was a friend to be met, he would introduce himself, if there was a club to join, he joined. If there was a cool skill



he wanted to learn like the piano or judo or baseball, he didn't just learn it. He mastered it. They wouldn't let him eat for the first week of his life. So he spent the next 10 years making up for that. He ate everything except polenta! Jaden had two speeds, fast and asleep. One time I was telling Bob about seeing a television show with Randy Pausch, The Last Lecture. One of Randy's points was people need to decide if they are a Tigger or an Eeyore. Jaden overheard this discussion and cheerfully chimed in that he was definitely a Tigger. Yes Jaden, you were my Tigger. Bob always said that Jaden was his hero.

### **What impact do you want to leave on the world?**

I want to warn people of the addictive and dangerous nature of prescription pain medications. I tell everyone I can. Some day, I would love to support a national campaign of some kind.

I want to facilitate healing for other burn survivors. I do this by being a SOAR (Survivors Offering Assistance in Recovery) provider at the burn units for Children's Colorado and University of Colorado Hospital. I was a physical therapist before the accident. I am still a physical therapist but I've learned how to be a burn therapist. I enjoy working with other burn survivors to facilitate their rehabilitation.

I want to give hope and support to other widows and grieving parents. I want to reach out and tell my story so others know that there is a path to healing.

I want my husband and son's legacy to live on in some form or fashion. I'm still kicking around ideas for this one!

## **What lessons could people learn from your life?**

Strength comes out of our worst situations. You truly never know how strong you are until you are tested. I said at the beginning of my recovery that I didn't intentionally set out on this journey, but I promise to take every step of it with intention.

I know my faith in God is where my true strength has come from. When you are in a hospital bed with no control of even your basic bodily functions, your family is gone, you don't have one familiar face to look at, you only have God. You only listen to God. You only talk to God. Your universe is that hospital bed and God is at the center.

In moments of "sedation", I remember walking behind Bob and Jaden on the shores of a magnificent body of water. I was desperately trying to catch up to them, calling their names. The only response I got was, "Not yet". At one point I thought I had died and gone to Hell. It felt like the same day kept replaying over and over and over. Later, I discovered I was just in an ICU psychosis.

**Leslie and Kellen**



Then I prayed to die. I figured that had to be way easier. And again, the only response was, “Not yet”. After that, I figured I better start living because God obviously didn’t want me dead yet!

That’s the real lesson with any loss. You are still alive, so live. Don’t just exist. Don’t just breathe in and out. Don’t just go through the motions. LIVE!

And just because you make the choice to live, it doesn’t mean you’re not still grieving. There is no “getting over it”. I like to think of it as moving through it. The pain is still there. It still hurts as bad as the first days sometimes. The void in your life is always there. The loss is there whether there are tears in your eyes or a smile on your face.

We who grieve set an example for others, especially our children. They need to see it is ok to cry. It’s ok to hurt. It’s ok to be sad. It’s ok to remember out loud. But it’s also ok to LIVE! It’s ok to laugh. It’s ok to have joy. It’s ok to have peace. It’s ok to LIVE without the guilt of being alive. There are so many moments of life to be enjoyed. Grief shouldn’t steal those moments.

I’ve told Kellen many times that if he loses his childhood and his joy to this tragedy then the Evil One wins. We can’t let the Evil One win our Christian hearts.

*Chapter Two*

# **A Father's Broken Heart**

by Jim Sitton



**Makayla Joy Sitton**

December 6, 2002 – November 26, 2009

Jim was asked to speak at a GriefShare support group, and this is what he said:

“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our tribulation, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any trouble, with the comfort with which we ourselves received from God.”

2 Corinthians 1:3-4

I've been told that when folks hear what we've been through and they see that we are still standing, they begin to feel that maybe they too can survive the valley of death and eventually overcome evil with good. So I'm not here to be pitied or to appear super human. I'm here to encourage you to keep putting one foot in front of the

other until you can learn to trust God again and find rest and comfort in Him.

Many times my wife would ask me "How are we going to do this? (for example – return to our house, attend the funeral, testify in court, design a headstone, have Thanksgiving, celebrate Christmas, see Makayla's friends) I would say, "Honey, place one foot in front of the other." It's the only way.

That's how I got up here on this stage! That's how I will tell you what happened to us Thanksgiving night, November 26, 2009.

After dinner and singing around the piano, I put Makayla in bed. We all went into the kitchen area to pack up leftovers and began saying our goodbyes. (It's better that I don't have much time so I can spare you most of the horrid details.)

Without a word, the murderer began shooting. It was like shooting fish in a barrel. First, he killed his sister right in front of me as I helped her with a bag. Then, he killed her pregnant twin. It gets blurry at this point, but my wife's mother was also killed and two others wounded. Then, he started toward the front door. Just before leaving, he stepped into our 6 year old daughter's room and shot Makayla Joy Sitton three times as she lay in her bed.

I was asked to tell you about Makayla, but it's impossible to even begin to tell you how special she is, in such a short time. So I'd just like to let you experience the last conversation we had as I tucked her in that evening. My wife, Muriel, was busy entertaining our guests and so I offered to put her in bed. A couple of days later I wrote down our conversation, so I would never forget.

Thanksgiving 2009 9:15pm, as I put Makayla down in her cozy pink bed.

**Me:** Wow honey, you were amazing tonight! I thought you were going to talk about the Pilgrims. Thanks-FEELING? I've never even thought about Thanksgiving like that. Where did that come from?

**Makayla:** (smiling from ear to ear) I've been reading about giving thanks in the Bible and just thought how rude it would be to receive blessings from God and never thank Him. That would only be Thanks-FEELING. So, I decided that our singing, playing piano and dancing tonight could be our way to GIVE THANKS to God for all He has done for us.

**Me:** Baby, I love you soo much. I'm very proud of you and the way you explained that to everybody. I think they were all shocked at how mature you are. (she smiled humbly) Honey, I want to give thanks too that God has allowed me to be your Papa. I'm thankful that you're my little Makaylakoo. You have been so thoughtful to everyone tonight. I saw how you greeted Lisa and Patrick at the door and made them feel welcome. And that game of Thanksgiving toss was very creative too. I loved the opportunity to tell you how beautiful you are from head to toe! And you were so brave to help me with the fire pit. You overcame your fears and put that big log on the fire. Wow, you are getting so big! OK, let me give you kissing

hands and get you to bed.

**Makayla:** (giggling) Nope kissing hands are just for Mama!

**Me:** What? OK, I guess I'm stuck with kissing FEET! (I grab her feet and bring them up to my lips) EWwwWWw! PEE YOU! (more lil girl giggles) Those are some stinky feet! (Not really, they smell like an angel's breath, I begin to kiss her toes with a sour look on my face.) She suddenly stops laughing and says, "Papa, smell my hair." I press my nose into her hair and it smells like smoke from the fire pit.

**Makayla:** Does it smell like smoke?

**Me:** Yeah baby it does.

**Makayla:** Just like you huh?

**Me:** Yeah baby, just like me. (She likes that thought and smiles knowing that she had helped me keep that fire going, in spite of her fears.)

**Me:** It's getting late, let's pray. Father, thank you so much for this beautiful little girl. Thank you for this sweet time together, and for these stinky lil feet. (she giggles) God, I am so honored that you have allowed me to be her Papa. Help me to be the kind of daddy that she can always be proud of. Help me to always lead our family in the way you want us to go. We thank you for our entire family and we hope to be reflectors of your light and love to them and to everyone we meet. Thanks too for Mama! We thank you for giving Makayla the most wonderful Mama in the world. And for brother JJ! God, thanks for that game of Thanksgiving toss that Makayla made. We were all given the chance to tell each other how much we cherish them. Thanks too for Makayla's teaching on not just feeling thankful but the need to actually GIVE thanks to You and each other. Thank you for giving me a little girl that has such a sensitive heart toward you. I know you have great plans for her and eagerly await for them to unfold. Most of all we thank you for your son who willingly gave up his

life, to pave the way for us to have this close relationship with you. It's in Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

**Makayla:** Papa, I'm so excited I can't sleep.

**Me:** I know baby, but close your eyes as you listen to your hymns and think about how brave you were tonight and how much we love you. (turns off light, turns on CD player)

**Makayla:** Papa?

**Me:** Yeah baby.

**Makayla:** I love you.

**Me:** I love you too! Now get some sleep, you've got a big day of dancing at the Nutcracker tomorrow.

**Makayla:** I can't wait!

**Me:** Sleep tight, don't let the bedbugs bite!

**Makayla:** Papa, my feet don't really stink do they?

**Me:** Of course not, they smell just like flowers!

**Makayla:** So you're just pretending?

**Me:** Yes my love.

**Makayla:** I like how you pretend they stink, and make those silly faces. Do that next time too, ok?

**Me:** Ok, stinky toes.

**Makayla:** I really do smell like smoke though, right?

**Me:** Yes.

**Makayla:** Just like you?

**Me:** Yeah baby, just like me. I'll see ya in the morning.

**Makayla:** Goodnight Papa

**Me:** Goodnight sweet pea. (closes door softly and smiles for the last time.)

I was wrong about never smiling again. Although it took over 3 years before I felt true joy again. Our home had once been full of love, laughter and music. But it instantly fell silent, cold and empty. No more lil' girl giggles. No more hugs or kisses for Papa. No music.



All of that was replaced by a mothers' wailing, anger and questions of WHY? Why Makayla, WHY US? Why GOD? How? How are we to survive this? Is it even possible? We had only two choices really, run from God into booze, anger and drugs, OR run to God seeking comfort.

Muriel was suddenly a stay at home, homeschooling mom, with no child. How sad is that? We would just sit there for months, deeply hurt, dazed and confused. We experienced PTSD, shock, anger, and fear. The murderer was still on the loose. Cops were protecting us 24/7. They were parked in front/back of our house in case he came back to finish us off. I was patrolling the inside, shotgun in hand just in case.

We were not sleeping much. When I did wake up from needed rest, there would be a second or so where I would think, "maybe it was all just a horrible dream", but then the memory and pain would rush over and through me again. The first thing I would hear would be Muriel wailing in Makayla's room. This went on for weeks and it began to annoy me because it was instant audible proof that, now, my waking life was a living nightmare and sleep was my only escape, however temporary. I felt robbed of those few seconds of groggy hope.

TV cameras, reporters and investigators were everywhere. Man hunts and searches seemed to go on forever. I was in hyper protective mode for a month before he was finally arrested. John Walsh, from America's Most Wanted and the US Marshals had finally found him.

Then silence, only our pastor and close friends came around, followed by a year of numbness. I eventually went back to work. Muriel would be left home all day, alone in

the empty house that had once been a home. Her mom used to visit almost daily but she was gone now too.

We tried having a baby a bunch of times. Our hopes would rise and fall with each failure until God finally showed mercy and brought blessing upon us in the form of Natalia Grace, our beautiful baby daughter.

One morning I woke up and heard something strange. It was really different – quiet and peaceful. Singing from another room? I listened closely and heard my broken wife softly singing, “Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound...” She was almost whispering but I knew at that moment she would survive. We will survive.

Mourning lasts through the night, but joy comes in the morning! Natalia Grace is 21 months old now.

It wasn't over. Grief never heals, it's more like an amputation. You eventually get accustomed to the missing limb but it's never really healed. You learn to live life differently. You learn to laugh (even without guilt sometimes.)

God never promised an easy, carefree life. He in fact said that we will have suffering and mourning and heartaches, but He also promised that He will be with us, to comfort us and re-unite us on the other side, on that glorious shore. That is our hope, He is our only hope. I pray that you too will place your faith in the only One who has the power over all, even time and death.



**The Sitton Family**

*Chapter Three*

# Grieving Gumdrops

by Daphne Greer



**Lydia Marie Greer**

November 27, 2002 – July 16, 2008

It was summer, July 16, 2008, to be exact. My son, daughter and I were on our way to daycare and work. We commuted 25 miles each way every day and were about 15 miles from home when we suddenly hit a farm truck in the middle of the highway.

After the car came to a stop, all I could hear was my 3 year old son, Hunter, crying hysterically in the back seat. I looked up, my windshield was shattered and driver's side door was caved in. I tried to open my door but couldn't.

I climbed out the passenger side door and immediately unbuckled Hunter, consoling him as best I could. I looked and saw my daughter unconscious in the back seat. The farm truck driver immediately came to help, as did a woman who stopped at the scene, taking care of my daughter, applying towels to her injuries.

Hunter and I sat holding each other on the side of the road waiting for help to arrive. Not knowing the extent of Lydia's injuries, we prayed out loud together for Lydia, pleading to God to save her and make her okay. These were the longest moments of my life. Trembling from shock, I tried to call my husband but was unable to dial the phone. Thankfully, the other driver was able to dial the number for me. With my husband on the phone, I told him we had been in an accident and he needed to get there fast. Before I knew it, my in-laws arrived and took care of Hunter, as I was loaded in the ambulance.

My husband got there just as Lydia was loaded into the helicopter. Then he drove an hour to the trauma center. Already in the ambulance and unable to move, the commotion of the responders and loud sounds of the propellers were frightening.

I was taken to the nearest hospital which was in the town where I worked. They took blood, urine, x-rays, and cleaned the deep glass from my arm ending with a plethora of stitches. I suffered a broken elbow, as well as severe lacerations to my upper arm and head. The entire time, the nursing staff was excellent and took care of my every need. I remember talking with them saying, "I just want my daughter to be okay" incessantly asking them, "how is my daughter." Thinking about it now, I never received an answer.

Before I knew it, a couple of hours later, my husband came in the room. He looked up at me sobbing, his eyes swollen with tears falling and said, “Sissy didn’t make it.” In a moment I will never forget, I began to scream and pleaded for this not to be true.

After several hours, I was able to leave, but before we could go, we were told we had to tell our son. The chaplain led us to a little room where my husband and I had the difficult task of telling him about his sister. We then were driven home with a co-worker of my husbands. I remember sitting in the backseat, in grey issued hospital sweats, heavily medicated, and not sure of what had just happened.

For days and weeks after, I felt like I was living a dream. I could not fathom what had happened as I waited for her to walk through the front door.

### **What would we want everyone to remember about Lydia?**

Lydia was my firstborn child and a vibrant little girl, so full of life and love. She had a love for dancing, shopping, and fashion. She was very outgoing and her big personality could entertain an entire room. I liked to call her the glitter glue to our family. She was the sparkle, the glitter and glue that has held us together.

Much like her grandmother, Lydia was a girl who loved to shop, eat cinnamon rolls, drink hot chocolate, and explore what the world had to offer. She loved the spotlight, as her singing and dancing was a daily occurrence in the house. She loved people, friends, and was a social butterfly. She was a creative soul who taught me not to worry about what others think and to be comfortable with who God made

me to be. She was known for her mismatched style, yet she took pride in her appearance and doing things on her own. She loved to draw and made beautiful artwork, leaving many notes and pictures around the house for us to find, long after she passed.



**Lydia**

Lydia would often talk about God and want to know when she could meet him and go to his house. She was fascinated by her family members who passed long ago, having a deep desire to meet her great grandparents, often requesting to go to the cemetery to see them. I would smile and tell her God is always with us and how wonderful Heaven is, but she had a long life to live on earth before then. Little did I know, her time here would be so short.

## **What impact do you want to leave on the world?**

As the years have gone by, I want others to see how God has worked in our lives, as well as Lydia's. Lydia was an old soul and looking back, there were signs all around me of what was to come. Yet, I wasn't able to connect the dots.

I want to be an example for all those hurting due to loss. I want them to see that it is possible to live a happy life, a life with passion and purpose. After struggling with faith during those first months, we have found our true reason for being and want to show others what God has done for us during this time. We've found by bringing joy and serving others, we have found our purpose. God still has a plan for those of us that are here; we must live to the fullest.

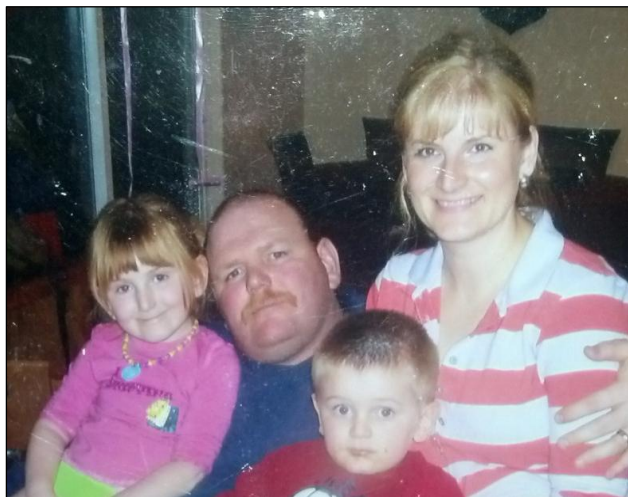
Most of all, I want people to realize that there can be a positive side or sweeter side to their grief. If we focus on the beautiful life that lived and keep legacies alive, incredible things can happen.

After a lengthy career in law enforcement, my focus has now changed. I was not the same person anymore and didn't have the same heart for my job. I now find my passion in helping and serving others, recognizing the true meaning of this life I have been given. In losing Lydia, I was thrust into a devastating world of heartbreak, yet there have been remarkably positive impacts on my life as well. From new friends and relationships, to closed doors and new opportunities, life has taken me on a new path of self-discovery. I hope others will see this and get a glimmer of hope during times when the world turns dark.



## **What lessons could people learn from your life?**

Bad things do happen to good people. After 14 years in law enforcement and having a fairly good life free of tragedy, I never dreamed that losing a child would happen to me. But it did. One thing I want people to know is the importance of slowing down and listening to God and let Him guide your path. Listen to what He is saying and telling you. Don't get so consumed with everyday life that you miss those moments. Moments with God, moments with your children, and moments with your family are the things that really matter. Re-evaluate your life and priorities. After going through this, looking back, I clearly see that God was with me, and how he worked in our lives, both before and after the accident.



**The Greer Family**

It's okay to smile through your grief. As time passes, it's okay to laugh and enjoy yourself. Don't let the devil of guilt consume you. We are still here for a reason. It's time to live life with purpose and passion. We all need to look deep inside and find what really motivates us and makes us happy. For me, I wanted my daughter to be remembered. It was a scary first year as people did forget. I have relied on God, trusting that He will direct my path and it will be okay. I know He will make triumph out of tragedy, and He has.

Lydia's Love was started in 2011, a nonprofit that provides birthday parties to homeless and needy children. This has been a rewarding and heartfelt experience. Seeing joy in children's lives during hard times is priceless. It has also been a wonderful way to get the community involved. From churches, school groups, families and organizations, Lydia's Love has given others a positive avenue to volunteer and serve.

In addition, I recently started blogging. This was something new to me, but something I felt a calling to do. The blog is called Grieving Gumdrops: The Sweeter Side of Grief. It's about my writing and reflections on my grief, as well as highlights other people, books, blogs, organizations, etc., that have found meaning or a positive sweeter side of their grief. In the midst of this, I am also working on a memoir, wanting to share my story as God has wanted me to. During the past five years, I have kept a journal and looking back, God has been with me all along and has done some miraculous and amazing things. I can't wait to share.

# LYDIA'S



*Chapter Four*

# **Hope after Suicide**

by Nancy Wickett



**Philip Hagan Wickett**

September 6, 1983 - March 1, 2007

The phone rang. It was 7:34 am. I grabbed it before it rang the second time. (Had I been asleep, I wondered?) It was my husband, Don.

"Is Philip in his room?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Is the van home?"

"Yes, why?" My heart started beating faster.

Don blurted out, "I just got this email he sent to all of us and it says, 'Goodbye Forever...'"

My heart sank. I dropped the phone. I quickly went to the hall. Philip's bedroom door was OPEN! He was gone. I told Don to come home and get me.

I'm not sure how I got through the next 8 to 10 minutes waiting on my husband. I prayed. Philip lived alone in an apartment, but he had stayed the night with us. And we spent a lot of time talking and listening to him. He had been depressed. I assured him that things would get better.

We arrived to Apartment E, and his door was locked. We banged on his door and no answer. I told Philip we wouldn't be angry at him, "PLEASE open the door..."

Don went to get the manager to open the door. Philip was lying face down on his living room floor. He had used a gun to kill himself. I will never forget that horrible sight. It is embedded in my mind forever. My precious baby boy was dead. Philip was 23. It was Thursday, March 1, 2007.

I was in shock! How could I go on living without Philip in my life? I saw him almost every day. He was my youngest child. I knew he was ill. He had been seeing a psychiatrist for two years and had been diagnosed with bipolar disorder. He also talked about suicide but always promised he would never kill himself. I prayed without ceasing for Philip to be healed.

Philip started showing signs of depression when he was 20. He had moved out of our house and into his own

apartment about one mile away. We thought he might just be lonely in his apartment. He still came home every day. He also complained about back pain and leg pain. Sometimes he walked with a noticeable limp. He said the medication helped at times and other times it didn't.

He began talking about suicide. We were frantic. We met with the psychiatrist who told us Philip was too bright and his IQ was too high; assuring us that Philip wouldn't kill himself. I didn't buy that. I begged Philip to see another psychiatrist, but he liked this doctor and wouldn't change. I listened to Philip tell me he hated his life and how he wanted to die. I prayed with him and for him. I promised him that those feelings would pass. Things would get better. He would have days that were a little bit better every once in awhile – that was such a relief to see! But then, the blackness of depression would drape over his whole body again. And I would see my son drown. I couldn't save him. My love wasn't enough.

The perfect storm was brewing. A relationship with a girlfriend ended. Philip had a well-paying job at a computer company, but he was unhappy there. He just quit showing up for work. After attempts to get him to come back, the company fired him. Philip was involved in a car accident. He called me to pick him up because his car would no longer run. We assured him that night that he could drive another vehicle and that everything would work out in time. Apparently we didn't convince him.

I worried about Philip, and he knew I did. I shared my faith with him often. He knew I prayed for him. I actually told Philip I could never live without him. He promised me that I wouldn't have to.

I am hesitant to say I lost Philip, because I didn't really "lose" him. I know where he is -- Philip is healed now in Heaven. He is no longer in pain and has no more tears.

"He will wipe away every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away." - Revelation 21:4



After he killed himself, I never thought I could go on. I barely did. I was in shock, and that protected me for a long while. I was a walking zombie for over a year. Even after that first year, I couldn't stop sobbing. All I could think about was Philip, and how desperately I missed him! It was the worst pain imaginable. The days were long and lonely – the nights were the same. I either slept all the

time, or could not sleep for many days. I gained 50 pounds. I was agitated and mean-spirited towards my family. I hurt them. It was a miserable time.

As a suicide griever, I would face the stigma of suicide often. The pastor had told us that God was waiting for Philip with open arms. I held onto what he said. I found out that many church-goers were raised to believe that anyone who dies by suicide goes to hell. I reminded them that this is not based on any Bible scripture. Suicide is not an unpardonable sin. Healthy people do not want to die. People who complete suicide are ill.

I questioned what I could have done differently and I blamed myself. Even though Philip had left us a long handwritten letter full of love and many caring thoughts, I was still left with the question, "why?" Suicide grief includes a lot of guilt and shame along with the pain and suffering.

Someone asked me if I had forgiven Philip. "Why?" I asked. "He was ill" ...would I need to forgive him if he had died from cancer? I thought. I gave the question more consideration. No mother should ever have to bury her child...ever... No parent should have to. Philip was ill, yes. I still had to forgive him for the pain he had put me through. But even more, I needed Philip to forgive ME for failing him as a Mom. I was supposed to protect him from all things bad and evil. I was supposed to keep him safe. I could not fix his problems and make things all better for him. I needed God to forgive me too. I did so many things wrong. So pleading for Philip's forgiveness and for God to forgive me was overwhelming. It was very easy to forgive



my son Philip for completing suicide. He didn't kill himself to cause me pain. He did it to end his. I forgive him. I also had to forgive myself.

The legacy Philip left was one of love. Philip won't be defined by the way he died, but in the manner of how he lived. He was high-spirited and loved others in a big way. Sometimes he hugged me full force and tried to lift me up as he squeezed, or sometimes he would just gently kiss me on the forehead when he said goodbye. Everyone knew Philip for his sense of humor and the way he could make you laugh. He was generous. He would help just about anyone in need. He was so compassionate and kind. He was a computer wiz and an amazing singer. He was loyal to his family and stayed in close contact. He was 6'-4" tall, and I looked up to my son in so many ways. I am very proud of him.

Since Philip's suicide, I have been active in the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention "Out of the Darkness Walks" with my husband Don, raising \$1,580 to date for TEAM PHILIP HAGAN WICKETT. ([www.afsp.org](http://www.afsp.org))

I have also found that people do not like to discuss suicide even though it is the second-leading cause of death for people ages 15-29. It happens every 40 seconds around the world. I try to offer other grieving moms encouragement, hope, understanding, and empathy on Facebook support groups called Mothers of Suicide and Mothers Against Suicide.

I finally feel like I can reach out to others and offer hope. I am becoming more involved with a suicide prevention program, HeartLine of Oklahoma. ([www.heartlineoklahoma.org](http://www.heartlineoklahoma.org))

Also, I have begun to share my life as a volunteer tutor. I have helped two elementary girls with reading skills in the last three years at Whiz Kids. ([www.whizkidsok.org](http://www.whizkidsok.org))

Things are easier. The pain is less raw; it has softened. My mind is not consumed with thoughts of Philip like it once was. I miss Philip and think of him often every day. I think about all the things Philip is missing and that makes me sad. I always assumed that his bipolar disorder was temporary. But I will never know for sure. I only know that I hated to see him suffer with such despair and anguish. He is now at peace with God.

We have a picture above our mantle I bought several years before Philip died. You see Jesus' face embracing someone in a hug. Underneath that the caption reads "Come to Me!" With the Bible verse "[I will] bind up all the brokenhearted... [and] comfort all who mourn..."  
Isaiah 61: 1-2

No one will EVER replace Philip in my life. He is my son. I know the true meaning of being brokenhearted. Suicide grief over a child is horrible...and seems unbearable. Only God makes it bearable.

I could not have survived without God's comfort He provided me. I never thought I would smile or laugh again. I've been blessed to have family stick by my side and love me when I wasn't very lovable. I am so thankful for that. I have a grateful heart. I survived the horrible suicide of my son and this grief journey. My surviving child James and his wife have blessed me with two amazing little granddaughters. They bring me much JOY! It's awesome to be their Nana! I never thought I would feel joy again. I do!

I will never "get over" Philip's suicide. I am not the same person. I would rather go the rest of my life missing Philip than never having him in my life at all. It is such a blessing to be his Mom. I will miss him forever.

If you, or anyone you know, feels hopeless or depressed or just needs to talk to someone...PLEASE CALL the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline 1-800-273-TALK (8255).

# **You're My Hero**

by Keri Cannella-Moye



**Rachel Leigh Cannella**

February 13, 1997 – April 11, 2013

It was a sunny Sunday afternoon on April 7th 2013. I was riding on the lawn mower in my backyard hoping to get my yard looking nice for spring. Both my 11-year-old son, Logan, and my 16-year-old daughter, Rachel, had a friend over for entertainment. Logan, not surprisingly, was inside showing his friend his new video games. Rachel, being much less keen on sitting still, was outdoors enjoying the sunshine. To escape the possibility of being delegated to do work, Rachel and her friend decided to

walk down to the lake not far from our house. In order to get there, they had to walk through the woods in our backyard and down about 200 yards. I remember telling her over the roar of the lawn mower to have fun and don't be gone too long. Little did I know, that was the last time I would see my daughter as a vibrant teenager as she smiled at me before disappearing into the woods.

In the next couple of minutes, my lawn mower ran out of gas and I lovingly convinced my husband to run up to the gas station for me. While waiting for him to return, I began picking up some sticks and balls in the yard. I heard Rachel's name being called by her friend in the woods down from my house. I couldn't distinguish the shouts between frantic yelling or goofing around, but my gut told me to pick up my cell phone and call Rachel to make sure everything was okay. I called, but it went to voicemail after a few unanswered rings. I was just about to dial once more when I received an incoming call from my sister.

She called because she was stuck in her car just outside her neighborhood, which was blocked off due to an accident with a couple of teenage girls on four-wheelers. Her story was enough to take my mind off of the uneasiness I was feeling about my own child in the woods. She continued to tell me that the girls were being taken away by ambulance, and I remember saying to my sister, "I hope they're okay. I can't imagine something like that happening to my child."

As I ended that phone call, I looked up to see my daughter's friend alone and walking into our backyard. As he made eye contact with me, his legs buckled and he fell to the ground. The only words I heard him say were,

“She’s dead. She’s dead.” At that moment, my life was forever changed. At that moment, I began to live with the guilt of not trusting my instincts when I heard Rachel’s name being called in the woods.

I instantly sprinted into the woods, ducked under branches, and ran straight through sticker bushes to get to my child. The image is forever ingrained in my memory. Rachel, my beautiful, vibrant 16-year-old daughter was on her back, arms spread out beside her, and a large tree was lying across her neck. Her eyes were open but rolled into the back of her head. I instantly reached for the tree. Her friend and I lifted it just high enough to slide it off of her lifeless body.

Knowing that she was not breathing, I began CPR. Unfortunately, as I attempted to give the first breath of life back into my child, it was resisted by a rush of blood coming from her throat. Knowing that her heart needed to pump, I began chest compressions while her friend used my phone to call for help.

The next 5 minutes felt like 5 lifetimes rolling over again. We were deep in the woods and it was hard for the police and EMT’s to find us. When help eventually arrived, the only thing I had left to do was beg for them to not give up on my child. That, and pray! We prayed for God to please protect and heal my child. That He make His presence known and felt through a miracle. Just as we said, “AMEN,” the words, “We have a radial pulse!” filled the woods. Rachel was air-lifted to Atlanta Medical where she was placed on life support.

For four days, we sat vigilant at her bedside. The love and support from family, friends, and even complete strangers flooded the hospital waiting room. We prayed and cried and prayed some more. On the fourth day, Rachel's doctor informed us that all of her test results showed absolutely no blood flow to her brain. Because of this, they had legally declared her brain dead and had labeled her time of death. At that moment I realized that my prayers were answered. God had healed my child, just not in the selfish way I had hoped.

### **What do you want everyone to remember about your daughter, Rachel?**

As a parent who has lost a child, one of my biggest fears is that the memory of my child and her legacy will be forgotten by those who once knew and loved her. Rachel started life so full of enthusiasm and delight. She was extremely animated and always eager to put a smile on your face. She excelled in everything she did, from academics to soccer to even playing the flute. Most memorably, she excelled at making us laugh. But, by the age of 13, it was obvious that Rachel was going through some changes. What some would consider typical teenage behavior, I saw a bit disturbing. By the age of 14, Rachel was diagnosed with Bipolar, and we were also informed of the benefits of learning all we could about Borderline Personality Disorder. Even though she was too young to be diagnosed, she showed many of the traits of this mental illness.

From the get go, I did everything I could to educate myself on both of these illnesses. Just as if she was diagnosed with diabetes or some other disease, it was my job as mom to make sure she received the best treatment in order to

ensure the most promising future that she could possibly have. With the support of my husband, I quit my job and made being mommy to my children my number one, and really, almost my only priority. I knew that Rachel was facing an uphill battle, but that battle could be won if we did it together. Together, we were a team, and over the next two years we sat through hours and hours of counseling. There were a couple of hospital stays and numerous medication changes until we found the proper concoction that would benefit her the most.



**Rachel**

Over the next couple of years, many people would tell me how patient and strong I was. However, through all of this, I had the privilege to witness what true strength and endurance really was. Not by anything I was doing, but by



intimately observing a young person suffer and be tormented from within her own head and personal thoughts. By seeing the pain in her eyes as she got out of bed each morning, yet being astonished that she could face another day at all. Most significantly, I saw a young soul aching while at the very same time, praising the Lord for loving her and never leaving her side. Over those years I went from finding her dark and disheartening journal writings to finding her favorite Bible passages and lyrics from her preferred Christian songs. The team that I thought Rachel and I had created was really being piloted by God the entire time, and it took my teenage daughter to teach me that. So, when asked the question, “What do you want everyone to remember about your beautiful daughter, Rachel?” my answer is this — Rachel was, is and always will be my Hero!

**What impact do you want to leave on the world and what lessons could people learn from your life?**

If we had a dollar for every time we heard someone say that “life is short, enjoy it while you can”, we’d all be filthy rich. I can’t count how many times I had heard this statement before that fateful day in April of 2013. I can, however, tell you how many times it truly inspired and motivated me to relish the wonderful times and accept the unpleasant days that we call life — Zero!

Don’t get me wrong, I don’t feel that I took everything for granted. I enjoyed my times with friends and family and I appreciated the love that filled my life. I even told myself that everything happens for a reason and that God would never give me more than I can handle. This helped get me

through the dark days after Rachel's diagnosis. I thought I knew how short and truly fragile life was, but I was hugely mistaken.

Life is literally a blink of the eye. It needs to be captured in every single heartbeat because we are never guaranteed a continued rhythm. Words must never go unspoken and thoughts never left unshared. The significance of this very moment can be the most essential of all of your days. On that sunny Sunday afternoon, as I rode that lawn mower attempting to clean up my yard for spring, I never thought that Rachel's beautiful smile would be the last smile she'd ever give me. If I had known, don't you think I would have cherished and treasured that simple gesture so much beyond what I did?

Nowadays, I don't blink before truly finding pleasure in that moment. Through my delight, enjoyment and love, and even through my tears, heartache and pain, I find pleasure. Why? Because my hero taught me how. She taught me how short and fragile life really is and that with God by my side, I can appreciate every second of it. If there is one lesson I would want people to learn from my life and experience, it's that life is a simple heartbeat away from death. Nothing but this very moment is guaranteed and I genuinely pray that this is a lesson that each person can learn before it has to be discovered.

### **What is Rachel's Ray of Hope?**

Like others who have lost a child, we had the desire to give back to the community and continue the legacy that Rachel began. Rachel's Ray of Hope is a non-profit organization with very simple intentions. Show love, give hope, and provide inspiration to those in need. To do this,

we don't have one specific idea or service that we provide. We include a vast array of services and support that range from collecting food for our local food banks to providing Christmas presents for many children of struggling families in our community. We have also provided over 100 "comfort bags" to local children who are removed from their homes for various reasons with nothing but the clothes on their backs. Our goal is to bring a community together by truly setting the example of "loving thy neighbor."

For more information about Rachel's Ray of Hope, please visit our website at [www.rachelsrayofhope.com](http://www.rachelsrayofhope.com).

*Chapter Six*

# **Promise and Beauty in the Darkness**

by Natalie Bacho



**Abigail Gracen Bacho**

July 22, 2003 – December 25, 2012

We've lived through pet loss, the passing of grandparents, and job loss. Then there are the more intimate losses. We had two miscarriages, Steve's father passed very early in our marriage, his mother 12 years later. My mother passed at age 68 in 2010. Our parents are loved and missed. Each loss was difficult as it carries its own circumstance and journey.

This is how life works in the big scheme of things.

However, life wasn't supposed to unfold the way it did for us on December 22, 2012. Something this horrible doesn't happen to our family. It shouldn't happen to any family.

When we were asked to share our experience, it was humbling to say the least. We are also grateful. We always view any opportunity to speak of our daughter as a gift. Our lives now are very different. Any given day is a mystery as to how it will unfold. Will the day bring tears or triumph? Plans may unexpectedly change because we hit a wall of grief. Nothing is certain anymore. Nothing is as it once seemed. Nothing that is, except for God's grace. Without this, we can't fathom how we could live through every parent's worst nightmare.

Steve and I are the parents to three beautiful daughters, three girls with very distinct and different personalities. We were always amazed at how children can be related and still be opposites. Same environment, same rules, nurtured the same, but each have such different spirits. As our daughters grew nothing could be more evident. Our children are just who they are. They are ours to teach, guide, and love. Who they are on the inside is who God has created them to be.

We were thankful. We were also frazzled, hopeful, stressed, and doing the best we could as parents. I've always said, there's no guidebook on how to do this. You follow your heart and pray. Sometimes you make mistakes and sometimes you get it right. You have unconditional love from your children and they have yours. There's promise and beauty in that. There's promise and beauty in so many things if we are open to it. Even through the darkest moments, if we try and see the light there is promise in this as well.

December 22, 2012 is a day that will never just be 3 days before Christmas for our family. After the hustle and bustle of getting ready for the holidays we were dedicating a day to be together. My dad had just arrived the day before to spend Christmas with us. The girls were very excited. Steve had been working late hours leading up to the end of the year. We decided to slow down and have a day of fun. First stop, a couple of hours at the skating rink. They were just learning this new activity. Still a little wobbly but they were getting the hang of it. I can see the day play over in my mind like watching a movie. I can see their big smiles, laughter and excitement for the days to come. A perfect way to start a well deserved break.

Next came Saturday evening Mass. Our choice to attend church on Saturday wasn't unusual, but I don't have an answer as to why we made this decision. Maybe it was one more chance to reflect on Advent and the anticipation of Jesus' birth. It was a quiet hour in church together as a family of five. I have a very vivid memory while we sat in our pew. Charlotte was 5 and could fall asleep anywhere. Her tonsils were enlarged and had been for some time. A date had been set to have her tonsils removed after the first of the year. She had fallen asleep on my lap and was snoring like an old man. We received a couple of sideways glances as her snores seemed to echo in the sanctuary. Abby got the biggest kick out of this. Trying not to break into a full laugh, she stifled her laughter to a giggle.

During this time, Abby did something that I will treasure forever. She rested her head on my shoulder as we sat side by side. When I sit quietly with my memories, I can feel the beauty of this moment. I can feel the weight of her head as her thick blonde hair brushes my neck.

By this time everyone was hungry. Next stop was dinner at one of our favorite local restaurants. We enjoyed our food as we talked about the day. Abby loved this place because it had one of her favorite items on the menu. Anything fried!

We decided to tour a local neighborhood's Christmas lights before heading home. This was a yearly tradition while listening to our favorite Christmas music. Another decision that can't be explained, I volunteered to drive. The rationale was that I was more familiar with the neighborhood. Not a decision that I would normally make. As we look back on this night, we know without a doubt,

God was with us. He was there and has never left our sides. Even when we pulled away, He stayed.

The next few moments are embedded in my memory. We were not far from the neighborhood. The light was green as we entered the intersection. In an instant there was a deafening booming sound. Then an immediate extreme hard jolt that caused our bodies to violently jerk as our minivan went into a jarring 360 degree spin. I lost all bearings as to where we were or what had happened. When the car stopped spinning it was smoking but still running. I was disoriented and confused by what had happened. I knew it was horrible. At the same time, I was trying to convince myself everything was going to be ok. It couldn't be as bad as it seemed.

I instinctively turned to look behind me and the first sight was Charlotte slumped over in her car seat. I called her name with no answer. Then I looked at Steve who was sitting directly behind me. He had blood coming from his mouth. He was making a groan that I had never heard

before. I took a quick glance towards his legs and could see pavement. His door was completely crushed. He couldn't answer me as I kept calling his name to grab Charlotte.

Hannah was in the third row with Abby. She was reaching for me and crying. My dad was moaning in pain as he sat beside me in the passenger seat. Immediately, I started to hear voices. These were strangers who seemed to appear out of nowhere. These voices started yelling at me to turn the car off. I tried, but what my mind was telling me to do, didn't connect to my hands. After a few fumbled tries I turned off the smoking engine. The passenger side wasn't impacted and doors started to open. These heroes began helping us out of the van. Someone grabbed Charlotte as she regained consciousness. I was able to crawl across the passenger seat and stand. Hannah was then beside me by the aid of these angels helping us. As I grabbed Charlotte from the arms of a stranger, I began to ask about Abby. I remember a woman coming up to me and as she wrapped her arms around us she started to pray.

I kept checking Hannah and Charlotte and repeatedly asked them if anything hurt. Hannah started to complain of left leg pain. I knew she needed to be examined. My dad was in a great deal of pain with his back. Within minutes but felt like hours, the sounds of blaring sirens arrived. I remember thinking this is very bad but at the same time, this can't be happening.

I never saw Steve again until I visited him in ICU. In a moment similar to being struck by lightning, in all of the confusion I suddenly realized I had not seen Abby. I started frantically asking people where is Abby? With Charlotte in my arms and Hannah by my side, I ran back



and forth between anyone I could find with a uniform pleading with them have you seen my daughter Abby? A rescue worker told me he thought she was in one of the ambulances. He led me to a rescue vehicle with an open door. As we approached it, I looked inside and saw a sight I will never forget. I saw a team working tirelessly doing chest compressions on Abby's small limp body. I'm a registered nurse. I knew what that meant. The parental part of me couldn't comprehend what I was witnessing.

From this moment, it was as if we were thrust into this unfamiliar, unfathomable world with no escape.

When I've allowed myself to look back, I can see the light of Jesus guiding us. Some moments more clear than others. The ER nurse's name was Martha. Not a common name but a name that held a lot of meaning. Martha was my mother's name. She lost her battle to lung cancer 2 years before. Her presence was very much missed, especially during the holidays. She was there. God was allowing me to feel the comfort of His presence through our nurse's name.

God provided love and strength as friends and neighbors came to the ER. He was there as the police informed me there were witnesses who had seen a large truck run a red light causing our accident. God was with Abby and Steve as family waited for their arrival to Atlanta hospitals by helicopter. Something as small as noticing one of Abby's nurses wore zebra striped clogs (her favorite print), told me He was there. He was present as family came while we waited and prayed.

As it became medically clear that the injury Abby suffered was brain death, there are no words to describe what that

realization is like. The reality of the situation was crushing. Abby's inevitable death was being discussed without Steve. While I had 3 days to hold her, pray over her, talk to her, tell her how much we loved her, Steve was fighting for his own life. However, in a strange way, I never felt alone.



Abby was bigger than life. She was determined, strong willed, and compassionate. She loved being with family and always wanted to be on the go. She craved the spotlight and let her imagination take her from the stage to the classroom as she pretended to be a teacher. Abby admired and aggravated her older sister. She protected and mothered her younger sister. She was a good friend and kids seemed to be drawn to her. Abby had a beauty and smile that lit up the room. Her contagious laugh could brighten the darkest of days. She was discovering

the vastness of God's promises through her weekly religious education classes. She was not perfect. We had our arguments. She could be difficult. Her fiery spirit could leave you fuming. Her compassion for others was just as fierce.

Knowing Abby's heart and who she truly was under her shell and knowing what only a parent can know of their child, it was never a question that Abby would want to give life to others through organ donation. She would want others to live, to laugh, and to love. With my 2 sisters and aunt (my mother's sister) by my side, I watched as Abby was wheeled out of the ICU room to give the most precious of all gifts on Christmas Day, the gift of life. Before letting her go, I studied her. I wanted the impression of everything about her embedded in my mind.

It would be 4 weeks before Steve would know we had lost Abby. He had been in a medically induced coma to give his body a fighting chance. There were moments that were unclear if he would survive. Looking back, there is no answer as to why or how I could function. Only the love shown by family, friends, and God's grace can answer that.

Just as there is no guidebook for parenting, there is no reference on how to do this. Where do you get the answers to the heart breaking questions? It's true what other parents of child loss share. It is a physical pain. Your mind can't process much. I believe this is another way God's grace allows your spirit and body to catch up with each other. Everything is different, family dynamic, relationships, marriage. Steve and I didn't face this together. Our grief has never been in the same place. He had to recover physically before his grief process could begin.

The one thing we had together was our faith. Who else could we turn to? Who knew our fear and our pain with no words? How could we explain the loss of Abby to her sisters when we didn't have the answers? Only God could carry us through this, individually and as a family. The generous giving of strangers was a way God provided in many forms. Through financial, spiritual, and personal means our family was being cared for. There are no words for the gratitude we have for so many. These gifts sustained us and gave us hope that through the darkest of days, a light was still leading the way.

This light and force kept tugging at us. Through the rawness of the loss of our daughter, we knew that Abby's life mattered too much to just end. Our circumstance was out of our control, but we could control what happened next. Lives had to be touched by Abby's precious life. There was no other option. We would start a foundation to help others in Abby's honor. Children will know her as their friend and she would continue to make people smile.

With our dedicated family and others who were placed in our lives for this reason, Abby's Angels Foundation was created in August of 2013. This foundation encompasses everything Abby and emulates her spirit. Handmade bracelets originally created by Abby's cousins, whom she adored, are the foundation's symbol of our faith and Abby's life. Nothing reflects Abby more than an accessory and a little bit of bling.

Proceeds from the sales of the bracelets help fund the mission of Abby's foundation. Purchasing a bracelet supports Abby's Closets. These are special spaces that provide school supplies to underprivileged students. Wearing a bracelet shares Abby's life and creates

awareness of the dangers of distracted driving for all age groups, especially teen drivers. The work will continue to evolve and be on the go, just as Abby was in life. The work will keep her present in our lives and in the lives of others.

Sometimes it's unclear as to how we got to this place. Other days it is very clear. Moments take shape like hills and valleys. Some parts of the day can be positive and productive. Other parts fall into pieces and are painfully confusing. You can't anticipate what will bring joy and what might bring tears. You breathe in and out. You take each day literally one day at a time.

Honestly, we don't know how to be a member of this club called child loss. We didn't want to join. We want our daughter back to watch grow into who she was meant to be. We want to hear all 3 of our daughter's voices tell us good morning each day. What we want and what we have planned doesn't always come to be. We will always miss Abby every moment of every day. It may not be for us to know why this happened and why our lives took such an unexpected turn.

What we can do is mention her name everyday and talk about her as we laugh and cry. Through memories, we remind Hannah and Charlotte of their lives together. We can still parent her through the work of her foundation and feel her strong guidance. We can help others through her giving spirit. We will continue to pray and seek God's grace and light through the darkness. We will turn to our faith and the promise of being together as a family of five, enjoying our days together once again.



[www.AbbysAngelsFoundation.org](http://www.AbbysAngelsFoundation.org)

*Chapter Seven*

# **Ella's Light**

by Lourie Formby



**Ella Marie Formby**

August 24, 2007 – February 4, 2013

“Arise, shine; For your light has come! And the glory of the Lord is risen upon you. For behold, the darkness shall cover the earth, And deep darkness the people; But the Lord will arise over you, And His glory will be seen upon you. The Gentiles shall come to your light, And kings to the brightness of your rising” (Isaiah 60:1-3).

Friday, January 25, 2013 was a beautiful winter day. The blue sky was clear with a slight cool breeze and temperatures in the mid-60's for most of the day in central Mississippi where we call home. My wife, Julie, called me early in the day to remind me of our meeting with friends later that night at The Back Door Restaurant, one of our favorites, located about 25 miles away in Columbia, Mississippi. I arrived home around 4:45PM and rushed in to shower and change clothes prior to leaving for our social event that evening. As we walked out, we talked about our plans for the next day, which included working in our flower beds, attending our 5-year-old Ella's first Upward Basketball game at the church, and then taking her to the birthday party of her best friend, Gracie.

That particular evening, we decided to take our original 1940 Chevrolet Master Deluxe Sedan, aka "Ole Bess", a car I had purchased 20 years prior. It was ideal for the short drive we were making and with a full moon rising visibility would not be an issue. We arrived at the restaurant as scheduled and had a wonderful visit with close friends of ours. As we started to leave at approximately 7:50PM, I stopped and showed my friend my car, and we talked for about 10 minutes. We hugged, said our goodbyes, and all piled into Ole Bess for the ride home.

As we made our way through the small town of Columbia, all three of us were in awe of the brightness of the full moon. Ella was the first to comment saying, "Look at the moon guys!" We all talked about how beautiful it was and the fact that it was so brilliant that evening.

As we turned onto Hwy 44 heading east, we again discussed the plans for the following day while Ella continued to comment on the moon. I began telling her

that the moon would dance through the trees and follow us all the way home. About 10 miles into the drive, I made a remark to Julie that it was very unusual to not see very much traffic on this highway. We had scarcely passed any vehicles since leaving the city limits of Columbia. Just about the time I said that, Ella reminded us that it was Friday night, and that she would be sleeping with her Mommy (a new tradition we had started a few weeks before). She added, "Daddy, you'll have to sleep in the guest room, because you snore!" We all laughed and continued our small talk.

It was at this point I noticed a car approaching from behind at a very high rate of speed. I glanced down at my speedometer, and Ole Bess was holding steady at her top speed of 50 MPH. As the car moved within 100 yards or so, I looked at Julie then glanced down to my left and said, "Honey, this fool is going to attempt to pass me on a double yellow line!" I began to move my car off the road to allow the person room enough to pass if they chose to.

Those words had barely left my mouth when the approaching car impacted ours at such a high rate of speed that it threw Julie and I forward violently. Our car was lifted and began spinning out of control. I yelled, "Hang on!" All I could hear were Ella and Julie screaming in pure terror. I turned the steering wheel hard left to correct the clockwise spin, but the car was uncontrollable. Then I saw a huge oak tree directly in front of us as my car came out of the spin. I attempted to miss the tree, but the car slammed into it, ripping off the right side of the car as it absorbed some of the impact. We hit a second oak tree head-on which caused the car to violently flip, throwing Julie out the passenger side door. The antique car did



have seat belts in the back but not in the front seat mainly due to the fact that they could not be installed easily.

As the car stopped, I was stunned. The car was lying on its right side trapping Ella and me inside. I yelled for Julie but she did not answer. Ella awakened and began screaming again and crying for her Mommy. I grabbed for her and unbuckled her seat belt in the darkness. I could smell gasoline and knew we needed to get out of the vehicle as quickly as we could before it ignited. I yelled for help because my left arm was broken and I could not open the driver's door, which was now directly over my head.



### **“Ole Bess”**

Finally, a good Samaritan yanked the door open from above and assisted me in getting myself and my daughter out. Once out of the car, Ella seemed fine for the moment, so I ran towards my wife's lifeless body about 20 yards from where the car came to rest. As I rolled her over, her

entire front skull was visible and looked as if she had been scalped. Her eyes were half opened and fully dilated. She was not breathing, and I yelled for someone to please call 911. I remember whispering something to the effect of “She’s gone!”

I then ran back to Ella, and it was at that moment a lady said, “Mr. Formby, I am one of Ella’s kindergarten teachers!” When she called Ella’s name, Ella ran to her. It was then that I began to hear my Julie moaning in pain, so I ran back to her. She ask me to roll her on her side because she was having trouble breathing. I kept begging someone to please call 911, and they reassured me help was on the way. In what seemed like hours but I finally started hearing the sounds of sirens coming in the distance.

Within about 25 minutes after the collision, Julie was airlifted to the local hospital by helicopter, and Ella (still thought to be okay) and I were transported by ground ambulance. But on the 25 minute drive to the local hospital Ella began seizing. She would never recover from her injuries and succumbed to chest and head injuries on Monday, February 4, 2013 at 10:29 AM.

The day after Ella passed away, I was contacted by a co-worker asking if it would be okay for his church to establish a memorial fund to assist us in paying our medical bills. I kindly said, “No, I don’t want to do that, but, if you wanted to start a children’s ministry, I would support it 100%.” Towards the end of that same week, my cousin sent me an email stating that Ella’s name meant “torch” or “bright light” in the Hebrew and Greek languages respectfully. This gave me an idea. I contacted the two individuals heading up the Ella Marie Formby

Memorial Foundation: Children's Ministry and asked them to change the name to Ella's Light: Children's Ministry.



A few days before we had Ella's funeral, I began researching ideas for a website, logo, and the possibility of creating a 501(c)3 (nonprofit) organization. The last week of February, 2013, we met with the church accountant to discuss and make plans for the donations they had received for the ministry. We thus began to pursue 501(c)3 status which was obtained March 15, 2013. God was absolutely affirming that He was blessing us and this ministry. Within 45 days of conception, we had incorporated the ministry, filed for nonprofit status, and begun building a foundation that would have the potential of reaching thousands of children in need of the love of Jesus Christ.

Children, starting from birth are exposed to both positive and negative teachings and behaviors that they will carry with them for the rest of their lives. Our ministry believes that if we can plant the seed with our children, the love for Jesus Christ can grow in each child's heart.

Ella's Light Children's Ministry, Inc. was created to keep Ella Marie Formby's memory alive by ensuring that as many children as possible hear God's word, come to know Him, develop a love and personal relationship with Him, and learn to serve Him through Christian programs and events provided by this ministry. Jesus told us, "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these" (Matthew 19:14).

All donations to Ella's Light will provide resources to rural churches that would not have the adequate means to provide Christian programs and events to reach these children. These resources will provide age appropriate bible studies and materials as well as activities for children at their biblical learning level. We understand that each child is uniquely different and God has gifted them to learn differently, therefore we pray our support to the rural church body will provide numerous opportunities for them to learn using their God given intelligence.

I have often stated that this has to be the worst pain and heartache we have ever endured, but we both understand that God had a purpose. Although we may not ever see the full reasons for Him to allow our only child to leave us, one day we will know.


This month will be the two year anniversary of that night that changed countless people. Since then, we have grown

a children's ministry that is located in Mississippi, Louisiana, Arkansas, Texas, Alabama, Tennessee, Georgia, Florida, and in foreign countries such as Syria, Africa, and Peru. God is working to save lost souls for his kingdom. With His help and direction we will fulfill His mission by sharing our light in an ever darkening world. If you would like to help support our ministry, please feel free to visit our website at [www.ellaslight.org](http://www.ellaslight.org) and get involved.

I have often thought about the needs of the poor and down trodden children in our communities. When we volunteer to help those in need, we are building rewards in heaven that will last for eternity, would you not agree? WE WANT CHILDREN LIVING SCRIPTURE NOT JUST LEARNING SCRIPTURE!



**[www.EllasLight.org](http://www.EllasLight.org)**

A dramatic landscape photograph featuring a dirt road that winds through a green valley towards a sunset. The sky is filled with large, dark clouds that are illuminated from below by the setting sun, creating a vibrant orange and red glow. The sun itself is a bright, glowing orb partially obscured by clouds, casting a long, intense red light across the horizon. The foreground shows the texture of the dirt road and the lush green grass of the valley. The overall mood is one of awe and tranquility.

**“Even though I walk through the valley  
of the shadow of death, I will fear no  
evil, for you are with me; your rod and  
your staff, they comfort me.”**