

Who Knew!

by Deseree Dobson

Although our families were not related by blood it did not lessen how much we were a family. Our moms had been best friends for over 20 years; their friendship allowed us four kids to grow up together, Keri was my oldest childhood friend, and this is our story.

In January 2004 when a barium enema showed a mass in Keri's colon, she was admitted to the hospital to undergo a routine colonoscopy. After her bowel was perforated leaving her with an illiostomy, the surgeon came into the room, to tell us the results. This is when life as we knew it would forever be changed.

We knew what he was about to tell us was not going to be good news, but none of us were prepared for the news that would follow. As the surgeon continued to tell us that in addition to the illiostomy, Keri had "Cancer" and that it had metastasized and was in her liver, pelvis, lymph glands and there was aorta involvement, I remembered thinking this is impossible; they have to be wrong.

In the weeks that followed; Keri's appointments at the Cross Cancer Centre would confirm that Keri had stage 4 Colorectal Cancer (CRC). Keri was not a classic case for CRC, she was a young 22 year-old woman, and it was almost unheard of that a woman her age would have this type of cancer. However, It did not matter that it was almost unheard of or that it was not typical for a female her age to have CRC, Keri was sick and she had the biggest battle of her life on her hands.

Keri's battle with CRC did not just affect her; it affected everyone around her, everyone who loved her. All of a sudden our lives revolved around "Cancer," this illness took over, cancer seemed to be all any of us knew. In school you do not learn how to deal with an unexpected diagnosis of cancer or anything that comes along with it, this is not something you can be taught. It is not until you hear those words "I have cancer" that you start to educate yourself on what comes next, how to deal with what it means, and what you intend to do with it.

Once we all settled into our new routine in life, it became about making life with cancer as normal as possible. Trips to the cross for chemo were about girl talk... "check out that doctor, he is cute!" Every holiday you can imagine was celebrated; they were always celebrated, but now Birthdays, Christmas, Halloween, and every holiday and "just because day" in between was celebrated like never before, they were over the top. It had to be the best one yet because even though you never showed it you always knew this could be the last big event we would celebrate together.

Keri's battle affected everyone involved, we all experienced the same stages of grief; each and every one of us just handled it very differently. I think for me the hardest part was the emotional effects I experienced. Keri and I were very close in age, and prior to her diagnosis I would have told you that I was untouchable. At that age the last thing I found myself thinking about was the possibility of being sick or having someone I cared about being sick, however that all changed when Keri became ill. Every chest cold, sore throat, body ache, or headache had me in a panic, what if it was more than that, what if my headache was actually a tumour, or what if my chest cold was lung cancer? I drove myself crazy with these thoughts, but because I did not want to add to the fear or worry my family and friends were already going through I just added it to all of the other stuff that was going on that I was bottling up.

At the time of Keri's diagnosis, I was 3 months pregnant; we had just sold our condo and were in the process of purchasing our first house. In an effort to keep things as normal as possible yet let Keri experience all the things she may not get a chance to experience, Mark and I made the decision to have Keri as involved in my pregnancy as possible. As long as Keri was feeling up to it, she came to every ultrasound and doctors appointment with us, she shopped with us, she helped pick out our sons name, anything she could be involved in she was.

Aside from Keri's illness everything in my life was wonderful, we had a new home, a new son, we were planning our wedding, I could not have asked for more and yet I could not truly enjoy these moments because each and every one of them made me feel guilty. Guilty on so many levels; I felt I could not share my excitement or joy because I was worried it would upset Keri, guilty because by not sharing how truly blessed I was to have these things happening in my life I worried I was hurting the individuals who were giving them to me, guilty because my new family and home were put on the back burner to make sure Keri and her mom and sister were taken care of, guilty every time we left Keri and her family to come home to where there was no cancer, and the biggest one of all; guilty because I was not sick, guilty because I did not have cancer.

Financially the effects were not as great for me or my family, we had the added expense of groceries as we would have Dar and the girls for dinner at least a couple times a week, we had the added cost of gas with the extra trips to the Cross or the Hospital or any running around we would do for them, to lessen their load. There was the odd day off Mark would take to allow me the ability to be more available for them, and what they may have had going on. On the other hand the financial effects for Keri and her family were much larger. For Keri her earning potential ended when she was 22, this left her with no other option than to move back in to her family home with her mom and sister. On top off the added cost of Keri being back at home her mom was on short term disability as she recovered from shoulder surgery and her own battle with an illness. There was the added cost of Keri's illiostomy supplies, the cost of parking at each and every one of her appointments, the gas to get to and from each of those appointments as well as the increase in price for the convience of take out dinners after a long day spent in the hospital, all the while worrying about the costs that will come if Keri were to pass away.

I did not have any of my own social effects, but one I witnessed was; as Keri fought this horrible disease she became a very thin, and even more attractive woman. As this transformation took place, Keri lit up, she loved going out and being noticed, she found a new love for social events, and travel. Her social life was full of things an average girl her age should be doing. I remember thinking why is it only when we are challenged to survive, do we decide to give ourselves permission to live?

Mentally I was exhausted, after returning home at night and trying to fit in some quality time with my family, I found it very difficult to shut my mind off long enough to relax and fall asleep. I found myself replaying the day over again in my mind, I would try to figure out how I could have made that day better for everyone involved, or how I could have fit more into the day to make it more productive. Once I was able to fall asleep there were not many nights that were not filled with dreams, even the dreams revolved around cancer. It seemed all the things I tried to ignore or not think about would play out in my mind. I would dream about what it would be like once Keri was actively dying or what she would start to look like when she was in her final days, or the fact that someone in my family could get sick and have their own battle with cancer. I remember being so tired and just wanting a good nights sleep, but also not wanting to sleep because I new the chances were that my night would be filled with dreams I would want to forget.

After Keri's diagnosis it did not take long until I was running on auto pilot, each day I just seemed to go through the motions. I could not find the ability to concentrate, I found no matter what I was thinking about, reading or watching my mind would just wonder and it would not be long before I was back to thinking about cancer and what it was doing to all of us. I was left irritable with everyone and angry at everything. Through Keri's battle I could not say the words "die", or "funeral" or things like "once you are gone." At the time I thought I was protecting her; by not saying those words it would show her that I did think that way or that I did not believe that those things were in our future. Looking at it now I think I could not say those words because of my own fear and what they meant to me. These words and what they meant scared me, they left me unsure of what would come and uncertain of the path we would all take once she was gone.

Physically I was determined to make Keri's illness, her battle and what we had all gone through have a reason and a purpose. Three days before Keri passed away, as I had done everyday that she had been in palliative I went up to see her once Mark was home from work. This time was different though, Keri always had lots of visitors, but this time it was just her and her dad, I

remember asking him if I could have a few minutes with Keri on my own, and as he left the room, I sat down beside Keri and for the first time we really talked about what was going on. Those words that for so long I struggled with were said, we talked about her dying, and how angry we were, and how scared it made us, and what it would mean once she was gone. It is the first time I cried in front of her since she was diagnosed, it is when I told her that I was so sorry that this had happened to her, and that if I could have made the cancer go away I would have. It was when I promised her that my son would always know about his "aunty Keri" and how important he was to her. It was the first time I told her that I wished I could have done more for her. It is also when I made my final promise to Keri, I promised her all of this illness, hurt, anger and sadness would not have been for nothing, I promised her people would know her story and that people would always know who she was.

After battling CRC for 30 months Keri lost her battle on June 10th 2006 at the tender age of 24. It had only been a few weeks after Keri passed away that I started to work on my promise to her. It did not take me long to decide what I wanted to do, one of Keri's greatest passions was softball, she had a natural talent for it and loved to play the game. There was not a better way to remember Keri and to tell her story than to host a Slo Pitch tournament in her memory. On May 25th and 26th 2007 we held our first annual Slo Pitch for Hope and Awareness* with the promise to ensure others learn about colorectal cancer before it is too late for treatment and a mission to create an event that will raise awareness to educate the general public in the available methods of detection and treatments of colorectal cancer. Although the tournament was never about money I am honoured to share with you that since our inaugural event in 2007 we have been able to donate an outstanding total of \$89,845.00 to the Colorectal Cancer Association of Canada, (CCAC) to assist in its efforts of increasing awareness of colorectal cancer, supporting patients, and advocating for population-based screening and timely access to effective treatments.

I never could have imagined the good that that would come from the tournament, this event has offered me an enormous amount of healing, which is something I never thought could happen. The hole that was left in my heart when Keri died has been filled with a new found sense of direction and determination. It has given me a passion for making a difference in the lives of individuals living with CRC; it has also opened many new doors for me including an opportunity to become a Cancer Coach for the CCAC. It has taught me that where there were no answers I needed to find my own. Cancer has taught me hard things and beautiful things, it has taught me to be a better person and to enjoy life, it has taught me to appreciate the friends and family I have in my life and that all that matters is what is in your heart. Watching Keri battle cancer and being involved as closely as I was, was the hardest thing I have done at this point in my life, but I have grown from this experience, and I would like to think I am a better person because of it.

*Previously called "Keri's Tournament of Hope and Awareness."