



FOR ASHLEY

*"This journey has taught me to not worry about the little things,
to be more passionate, understanding, helpful."*

We have heard it over and over ... "I can't imagine what you're going through." What they are referring to is the death of our daughter.

I remember that day, July 2, 2008, when my wife, Jody, and I sat down in the doctor's office with our 22-year-old daughter, Ashley Marie, and the doc said those words you never want to hear, let alone, about your child ... "It is cancer!" We both sank into our seats, a lump in our throats, holding on to her hand, wondering what was going through our daughter's mind and asking ourselves, "this cannot be real" or "why her, why not me?"

Ashley was diagnosed with stage 4 of a very rare cancer called Adrenal Cortical Carcinoma. When diagnosed, it was already a tumor the size of a softball and had spread to the liver. The next months would either tear our family apart or bring us closer together. Surgery was scheduled to remove the tumor, the adrenal gland, half her liver and gall bladder. Thus the journey began ...

When someone close to you is diagnosed with cancer the only thing you can do is be in shock, cry, then pray, then hope. What we came to learn is the strength Ashley had and how she held us together, not the other way around.

One of the first things we did was to create a CaringBridge website. This way we could share our updates, our journey, keep loved ones informed and in return have them post comments. Throughout our seven-month journey, Ashley was always thankful for those that did write to her. It gave her and us hope. It not only gave strength to us but to those that read. She never once said "Why me?" She desperately wanted to live but if that was not to be, she had a great faith that she would go home to be with Jesus and her grandparents. One of her earliest entries I remember proved that when she said, "Just found out that my check-in time is 7:30 am at Methodist so we are thinking I will go into surgery around 9. My parents will keep you updated until I'm well enough to write again.

I'm really staying positive about all this and I know I'm in good

hands. God will take care of me, he has a plan. I'll talk to you all soon. Much Love, Ashley." Another positive she wrote, "Day 5. This is Ashley talking to you but Mom is typing until my brain clears from the medications. Thank you so much for all of your support and kind words. It has greatly helped me through this. I didn't know I had so many cousins :-) I love to hear the stories about my kids at KinderCare. (I hope Ed's head is feeling better)." Ashley also made sure to have us write Cancer wrong, like canZer. Don't capitalize it and don't spell it right. That way you have the power over it. As a father I look back at all those journal entries yet today and think "Is this MY daughter? Where did she get so much strength and faith? From me?"

Since her death, in which we just marked the third Anniversary of her Angel Day, my wife and I have grown to learn to live life, as our daughter would want us to. Our daughter Angela, who just turned 23 and still misses her best friend, has grown into a stronger woman that I am so proud of. This journey has helped me to be there for a close friend whose son a year later passed away from a brain tumor. Or at a request of our pastor to talk to a parent that just lost their son, as we know the pain they are going through. This journey has taught me to not worry about the little things, to be more passionate, understanding, helpful. I know life moves relentlessly forward one day at a time, and there is nothing any of us can do to stop it or slow it down. We are all getting older every day, but we don't have to grow older every day. In a poem by Linda Ellis she states that there is a birth date and a death date, but what is important is the dash between those years. For that dash represents all the time that we spent alive on earth and now only those who loved us know what the little line is worth. Live your life to its fullest, laugh at all the things that don't matter, love with all you have. Make the most of your dash, as this special dash might only last a little while.

To follow the inspiring journey go to www.caringbridge.org/visit/ashleymariehanson

