

# Cranes of Courage for Clarissa

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Kristen and I found ourselves in a place and position we never dreamed of. While waiting quietly in the doctor's office for an unsure outcome, we had no idea that we were about to experience some of the most amazing events of our lives. It was a Monday afternoon on December 17, 2007 the day after Clarissa's birthday. At the request of my wife, the three of us were at the Logan hospital waiting for Clarissa's doctor to return with the results of her first CAT scan. Kristen had been noticing subtle changes in our daughter's health since late October. Struggling for energy, Clarissa's met her Tenth birthday with a subdued and somber tone rather than the exuberance of an ordinary 10 year old. The 3<sup>rd</sup> of our 4 children, Clarissa had been active in soccer, basketball and other school activities. Clarissa was a bright, blond girl with vivid green eyes and a zest for life. Clarissa was growing up fast and had a maturity about her that seemed ahead of her time. An attribute that her 4<sup>th</sup> grade teacher, Mrs. Anderson, would often use for classroom help and peer resolution. With 2 older sisters, a younger brother and 2 golden retrievers, we were a family full of active life.

As we waited in the doctor's office, my mind reflected back on the reasons we were here. Clarissa had been tired, sleepy and mentioned frequent headaches. She was not eating well and recently looked pale and tired. In early December her condition worsened. We could all see it now. Two nights earlier, Kristen dreamed that Clarissa's declining health was a result of a brain tumor. Startled, she woke me around 2am and described her dream and the thoughts she was having with deep concern. The next morning an appointment was made for a CAT scan.

At last the Doctor arrived and looked into our eyes with certain anxiety. An office monitor was used to confirm our deepest fears. Fluid was collecting between Clarissa's brain and skull. Her ventricles were being compressed by a walnut sized growth just above her thalamus. The doctor told us that we should leave immediately for Primary Children's hospital in Salt Lake City where she could receive a high resolution MRI and have a group of experienced doctors help us determine exactly what we were dealing with. We arrived home to an anxious group of children. As we shared the news, tears filled our eyes and hugs were readily shared. I told our children that now is the time to square our shoulders, be strong and plead for God's help. Nearby family and ecclesiastical leaders quickly gathered at our house prior to our departure. A sincere, heartfelt priesthood blessing was offered and we left for the hospital.

Three days later, Clarissa's first brain surgery was complete. The ventricles were successfully opened using a stent and a biopsy of the tumor was sent to the lab. A day later, the biopsy revealed that Clarissa had a stage 3-Anaplastic Astrocytoma. An aggressive form of brain cancer that is considered difficult to cure and due to its location, the tumor was declared

inoperable. This biopsy result brought more questions than answers as we consulted with our doctors to find a cure for our daughter.

News of her condition spread quickly to family, friends, neighbors and ward members. While her outlook seemed bleak, it was almost Christmastime and we prayed constantly that despite her condition, our family would be able to spend Christmas at home together. Kristen was always at her side as I tried to maintain some sense of normalcy with work and a regular schedule for the kids. During the next several days our family received many wonderful expressions of compassionate love. Generosity and help appeared from everywhere. It's difficult to describe in words how we felt as wonderful people provided rides for the kids, meals, house cleaning, laundry, places to stay, gas cards, Christmas lights and other acts of kindness that will only be known by the giver and the Lord. Our prayers were answered in so many ways but especially the opportunity to spend Christmas at home together. The doctors had decided that Clarissa was well enough for her to come home. We were so grateful that our prayers were answered and the blessing of spending time together during the holidays. Before leaving Primary Children's Hospital, a team of tumor specialists consulted and presented us with our options. The aggressive nature and location of her tumor left us with few choices. It was determined that after the Christmas holiday, Clarissa would start 6 weeks of intense chemotherapy and radiations treatments at LDS Hospital in Salt Lake City.

It was upon our arrival home that we learned first learned about some of the many amazing miracles. We'd scheduled the treatments at about 2pm each day. This would allow us to avoid rush hour traffic and allow our pleading daughter at least a half day of school. Concerned but open to the idea, I went to visit with her 4<sup>th</sup> grade teacher about the prospects of adding a big challenge to her classroom. As I walked through the hallways that led to her classroom, I noticed a large sign strung from one wall to another. For several feet behind the sign were hundreds of hand folded paper cranes attached to a patch work of yarn that criss-crossed from wall to wall. The sign read "Cranes of Courage for Clarissa". When I arrived at Mrs. Anderson's room, I inquired about what it all meant. Mrs. Anderson had introduced a book to her class entitled **Sadako and The Thousand Paper Cranes**. She explained:

*"Sadako Sasaki was only two when an atom bomb dropped on Hiroshima. She was twelve when she died of leukemia. On August 3, 1955, Chizuko Hamamoto — Sadako's best friend — came to the hospital to visit and cut a golden piece of paper into a square and folded it into a paper crane. At first Sadako didn't understand why Chizuko was doing this but then Chizuko retold the story about the paper cranes. Inspired by the crane, she started folding them herself; spurred on by the Japanese saying that one who folded 1,000 cranes was granted a wish. Sadako fell short of her goal of folding 1,000 cranes, having folded only 644 before her death. Her friends completed the 1,000 and buried them all with her."*  
Source (<http://www.wikipedia.org/>)

Mrs. Anderson then told me that after reading the book, her classmates began making paper cranes for Clarissa then attached them to the hand strung yarn and walls of the school hallway. The special title was written and carefully hung in behalf of Clarissa. The children seemed to sense the tremendous courage she would need as she faced the fight of her life. I didn't know what to say as I struggled to fight back the emotion invoked by this amazing act. I walked quietly back through the hallway toward the door. I went home and told the family about what was happening at her school. It didn't stop there. My wife then related that four of Clarissa's closest friends had been making and selling their own hand-made bracelets each day during their lunch hour. With the permission of the principal, a small table had been arranged in the hallway with the sign that read: "Clarissa Bracelets \$1". The girls made and sold 224 bracelets and presented a bag full of miscellaneous coins and bills as an effort to combat the rising expenses involved with fighting cancer. As we began our daily trips to Salt Lake a man called one night and asked if I was the father of the little girl with cancer and presented us with an act of kindness we could hardly believe. His occupation allowed him the resources of a large food distribution company. With the help of our local grocery store, a fund raiser was planned. The kind man explained that he would like to have a donated luncheon at the grocery store and sell Lance Armstrong-like bracelets at the fundraiser. He then asked us what we'd like printed on our bracelets. We thought for a moment then responded "Courage". The navy blue bracelets were printed and placed at the donation table with one simple word "Courage". To the casual passerby, the meaning was lost, but to those who truly understood, it was a word with deep meaning.

On a cold Saturday morning in April, a beautiful white limousine arrived at our house to take us to the fund raiser. An anonymous donor wanted a very special 10 year old girl to feel like a princess for at least a day. It did just that as she rode in giddy awe through town toward the grocery store. Upon our arrival at the grocery store we noticed the large sign that hung across the front of the store which read: "A Special Day for A Special Girl". Despite the frigid air, a community of hundreds gathered in support of our family. The support was overwhelming as we greeted, thanked and cried.

For six weeks we battled the especially snowy winter conditions as we drove back and forth between Cache Valley and Salt Lake City. During this time, something amazing was happening to Clarissa that inspired all that new and loved her. She faced the challenges with incredible fortitude. But not only that, she became angelically grateful in every way. As the pain increased and her challenges became harder, she became more loving. Each day she expressed love and kindness toward her life and loved ones. Each day she was grateful to be alive. Hardly able to stand on her own, she would ask to ride her bike, jump on the trampoline or go for a walk with her dogs. Life is a gift and she was taking full advantage of it.

With her radiation and chemotherapy complete we waited 2 weeks for the swelling to subside. With high anticipation, we then returned to the hospital for what would be Clarissa's final MRI.

Swollen, tired and worn from weeks of treatment, I found myself once again in a doctor's office with my daughter. Just outside our door, my wife was consulting with our doctor. As we waited, we talked a little as I looked at what cancer was doing physically to our daughter. Out of the blue and in a concerned tone Clarissa asked me a question I was hardly prepared to hear or answer. She wondered if it was OK for her to die. Surprised, I re-assured her that we are doing everything we can. Then she turned and looked me in the eye with a sincerity that I have rarely experienced. The question came again, as if to ask permission, "Daddy, is it OK if I pray to Heavenly Father to die?" I turned and looked at the wall as I struggled to appear confident and reassuring. I silently pleaded to our Heavenly Father for an answer to her question. I wondered quietly to myself how a child of her age understood what she seemed to understand. I assured her that if that's what she and Heavenly Father wanted, it was OK with me. We learned that day that the tumor had not only been unresponsive to the therapy but that her condition had worsened. New cancer appeared in other locations. We had reached the point medically that there was nothing more that could be done for her. Everything modern science had to offer failed to heal our daughter but the gifts of love and the sweet demeanor of our daughter was healing our family from within. As we sat in meeting counseling with doctors about the next step, I looked at the exhausted, swollen face of our 10 year old and with a quiet confirming glance from Kristen we made the decision to take Clarissa and spend what time we had left together within the walls of our own home.

At the end of each school year the Cache County School District hosts a 1 mile race in Wellsville, Utah called the Wellsville Mile. The goal of this race is aimed at helping our 4th and 5<sup>th</sup> grade children recognize the importance of staying healthy by keeping active. Clarissa was determined to participate with her classmates. Wheelchair bound and exhausted, we arrived at the race. It was time for our heat, the gun fired and my wife and I pushed our daughter steadily through the course. Around each of our wrists was the blue bracelet that read "Courage". Twenty yards from the finish line I stopped the wheelchair. With the help of my wife, Clarissa stood and slowly walked across the finish line to the sound of a cheering crowd. A few days later Clarissa passed quietly away in the arms of parents that learned about the true meaning of courage.

Without complaint Clarissa endured an ordeal that should be vacant from the lives of our children. She did it with angelic resolve and pure courage. Her last words to her family were: "I love you; I'm going to miss you." In 5 short months from diagnoses to her passing, she touched and inspired many lives. Mostly she taught each of us that the difficult challenges we face in this life will take pure courage.

Written By Jed Packer