

The Flame Presentations is a mother's story of losing a child to drugs... and what you need to know as a parent, teacher or professional...

From Someone Who Loved Cassie
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I can tell you the last beautiful fall day of the year 2000. It was November fourth. The weather was crisp. All of the leaves had fallen off the trees and lay as crunchy carpet in our yard.

It was Saturday, my day off. I had a formal dress pattern and material sprawled out on the floor. The top would be strapless leather, with a v-cut in the middle. The bottom would be a fitted long skirt made of black silk. I picked it out myself for my 18-year-old daughter, Cassie. I knew she would look stunning in it, with long gloves, an antique purse (from my mother) and a delicate shoe to set it off. It was our tradition to make all of her formal dresses because Cassie was 5' 10" tall, and nothing in the stores was long enough for her.

I wasn't a very good seamstress, but Cassie wasn't picky. She looked beautiful in everything I made and she wore all of my mistakes proudly. It was a pleasure to sew for her. When I finished her first dress, I embroidered inside, "Made with love for Cas, '98".

Greg, her father, and a past insulator by trade, was excellent at cutting patterns of any kind. When he saw me struggling with the design of the matching drawstring purse, he took a new piece of left over material and laid it out on the floor. He cut the pattern for her purse. (Not too many people know about this past bull rider and rancher designing accessories for proms.) The finished product was lined with a place even for her lipstick.

The whole process charmed Cassie. From that day on, not only did we make all of her dresses, but we helped her friends make theirs as well. The two weeks before any formal was always busy with sewing, woman-talk, laughing and eating...

I had to get the dress started today. Formal was only 19 days away.

Cassie had an exotic beauty: beautiful olive skin, brown eyes with gold flicks, full lips and flawless features, a slim frame and light brown shoulder-length hair. Although she was very tall and graceful, she didn't consider herself beautiful though. Like most teenage girls, all she saw were the self-invented flaws.

Today was also busy for Cassie. It was the first day she started coaching her little sister's basketball team. Everyone was supposed to meet in the gym at noon. They were getting ready to play in a parochial school basketball tournament in Billings (150 miles away) in just a couple of weeks.

The day hadn't started out very well. Cassie had missed her curfew by a long shot Friday night. She told us she was going to stay the night with Grandma, who lived in a trailer in the front pasture of our property. Grandma called early to let us know that Cassie had not shown up to spend the night with her and she was wondering if Cassie had come home.

Although I was worried, I told Grandma not to worry. "Maybe Cassie had fallen asleep on Levi's floor. She's a good kid. I'm sure she'll call." And I hung up the phone. Levi was Cassie's boyfriend of three years. He had graduated the year before.

A short time later Cassie called to apologize for staying out all night. She said she had fallen asleep on her Levi's front room floor, as I had suspected.

I told her to get right home and that I figured that is what happened. I was still annoyed with the lack of her adherence to the rules. But I believed her -until I saw her.

A few minutes later, Cassie walked through the door. She looked horrible. I assumed, much to my dismay that she had been drinking.

I confronted her about my suspicion.

"Cassie, you have been drinking all night, haven't you?" I accused.

"No Mom, I promise, I haven't been drinking." She swore.

"Cassie, I'm not stupid, I can tell when someone has been out all night drinking." I assured her.

"Mom," She said sincerely, "I promise you with all that I am that I did not touch alcohol last night."

"Your Dad left upset this morning. He wants us to all sit down and visit this evening. I know you are 18 and feel ready to be on your own, but as long as you live here, you have to follow our rules. That includes coming home at curfew and not drinking!"

"Mom," She said softly, "This won't happen again. I'm sorry." And then she moved in to hug me. I accepted her hug and kissed her warmly.

"What do you want to do about practice?" I asked, moving on.

Cassie responded sheepishly, "I would like to lay down until 10:30 a.m. Would you wake me up then? I have to be at practice at noon." I agreed to do as she asked and she went to lie down.

It wasn't just this morning that Cassie didn't look good. She had been sick for the last three weeks. She had a real gravely, loose cough. She had dark circles under her eyes.

Her hair was getting broken off and thin. She looked like she might be losing weight. She was never home.

We thought between work and school she was getting too run down. We thought she had the same virus that I had had a few weeks before - one of those hang-on viruses that I couldn't get rid of. In the past three weeks, we had taken her to two different doctors. The last visit was just two days ago. Both doctors told her she needed to quit smoking. Her lungs were in terrible shape, but all of our, well thought out lectures hadn't deterred her from smoking. We blamed her "bronchitis" on the smoking and the fact she wasn't getting well. She told me she would try to quit and she had even asked me to pray with her about it.

At ten thirty, we started trying to wake Cassie. We called her and called her. She finally roused, looking worse than when she laid down, workout would be good for her. Sweat out the poison.

At 11:30 a.m. Cassie and Nicki left for basketball practice. They had to pick up another little girl who lived on the way. So off they went, Cassie looked willing and happy to be coaching her little sister's team but because of her activities the night before, she looked kind of like working out was the last thing she wanted to be doing. Nicki was full of expectation and pride that her sister was going to be the coach. She worshiped Cassie. You could tell by the way she looked at her. Her eyes were always on Cassie. She asked her opinion on everything and she always respected what Cassie told her. Her face was especially bright when Cassie was around. Cassie could make her madder than anyone. She was always trying to be included with Cas and her friends.

The girls were 6 1/2 years apart. Cassie was more like a mother to Nicki. She baby sat her, gave her rides, helped her with her homework, offered advice and served lectures. She gave her basketball pointers, rides on her shoulders and swimming lessons. Because Cassie was going to be her coach, this was a big day for Nicki.

While they were gone, I busied myself with my to-do list at home. Time passed quickly. The girls came tumbling in two hours later, exhausted, sweaty and laughing. They had had a great practice. They said it was lots of fun. Everyone had enjoyed it. Nicki said all the little girls loved Cassie for their coach. She made practice fun and taught them a lot in just a couple of hours. You could tell Nicki was proud of the way things went. She had mentioned that she was really looking forward to the tournament now...

Cassie went into her room to change. She put her robe on over her clothes. I thought that was strange, but blamed it on the fact she wasn't feeling well. I guessed she was feeling chilled. I offered to fix her something to eat, but she declined.

After practice, when she still looked horrible, I felt concerned that maybe the bronchitis was turning into pneumonia. I made a mental note to keep her home the rest of the weekend to keep an eye on her. I thought it was strange she would drink to begin with, much less when she was ill. Cassie interrupted my thoughts.. .

"Mom, those girls are going to kill me! I'm so out of shape!" She kissed me and hugged me and said, "I love you. I'm sorry I was out all night. I told her I loved her too. I kissed her cheek, three times and hugged her tight. (I never just kissed my girls once. They knew after the first kiss, to leave their cheek out, because there were always two more coming.)

After we talked, Cassie went into the bathroom.

Nicki was in the bedroom playing a computer game. We both heard a loud crash. We met each other in the kitchen. We asked each other what that noise was. I offered, "It must be that shelf again." The shelf in the dining room fell sometimes when someone closed the door to the bathroom too hard.

I went into the dining room to put the shelf back on the wall, but when I saw it was still in tact, I felt panicked and called out, to Cassie in the bathroom, but she didn't answer.

I called out again with a voice that expects an answer, "Cassie!"

I felt a cold chill run through my body and I stiffened. I tried to get the bathroom door open. Her legs were blocking the door. All I could see were her feet. When I pushed my way in, she was bluish and her head was cocked against the tub. Right away I thought she fainted and then hit her head on the edge of the tub. I suspected a severe concussion. Seconds later, I realized that something else was terribly wrong and I started screaming to Nicki.

"What's wrong with Cassie!"

I drug her out into the dining room and called 911. I instructed Nicki to take the car and drive over to Shannon's house. Shannon is a nurse who lives across the country road. She did as I asked and ran out the door.

Imagine sending a twelve-year-old with a vehicle all by herself to look for help. She had learned to drive over the last two years with Grandma, Dad and myself on the country roads. She was a good driver, but driving alone, she could have been injured or injured someone else. At the time I wasn't thinking all of those possibilities because my oldest child was dying.

I opened the front door wide so the firemen would know which house to come to. I saw Grandma, who lived in a trailer a few hundred feet away. She was shaking her rugs off of the front porch. She smiled and waved. But I let her see the full panic on my face. I waved to her to come over.

I ran back into the house where Cassie lay and I stared down at her blue, still body. I remember thinking, "My God, I have to start CPR!"

I used to work in the hospital. We all had been trained in CPR, but that's when I was pregnant with Cassie. I couldn't remember how to start. I begged God to help me.

I begged, "Please God, please don't take her. Please don't take her."

I screamed at Cassie to come back, and I started CPR.

Pushing into her I coached, "Come on baby girl, don't leave mama. Come on Cas."

I breathed into her. Her lips were getting tight and cold. Her stomach would rise with every breath and an eerie hollow sound would come from deep within her. The sound of my own breathes searching within her for her body to respond back.

"I'm ok now Mom, you don't have to do that anymore. I just fainted."

But all I kept hearing were my own breathes echoing back inside the emptiness of my daughter. Her hands and feet were turned inward, like the knuckles were turning the hand and the toes were turning the feet toward the center of her. I did not know at the time that this was a sign of permanent brain damage. She was cold and blue. I kept breathing into her, terrified and stricken with only what was happening that second. I had no idea what was going on around me. Like someone in the front of the world's biggest roller coaster, I was gripping to endure the downhill ride.

At one point it dawned on me that she could have some poison or chemical in her system. I slapped her face. I had never done that before.

"Cassie, wake up! Did someone give you drugs last night?" I checked her jean pockets for evidence of this. I didn't know what I was looking for, but I knew then that something was in her body.

Grandma had come in and I heard her yell Cassie's name. I blocked her out. I had to focus.

Nicki came back. Shannon wasn't home. Nicki saw I was doing CPR and started screaming. I told Grandma to take her outside.

It was forever before the paramedics and sheriff came. I was sure they would push me out of the way and do CPR the right way. But they told me, "Keep going". As they set up their equipment, I was counting, "One and two and three and four," Shouting it out loud.

CPR is very painful for the person receiving it. Done correctly, it breaks ribs and causes bruising. It was hard to push hard enough into my child's chest to do any good. I knew I was deliberately hurting her.

"This wasn't right. It wasn't right"! I was yelling at myself.

I desperately wanted someone else to take over. I felt like I was trembling so much I was losing control of my body. Cassie was still cold and purple.

Finally, the paramedics took over. They hurriedly surrounded my daughter with small machines and tubes. One machine was attached to her chest. I remember being so surprised and afraid when the machine started talking out loud and it was telling them to shock her.

I remember asking a sheriff deputy, an acquaintance who was standing in the kitchen, "Pat, is she dead?"

He didn't answer me. He looked right at me and then at Cassie. He had a drained, panicked look on his face. The kind of look you might have if you were watching someone drowned. We had known them for years. His wife had taught Nicki at the country school, just two doors down. He had helped Greg chase bulls when they got out of the fence. He knew us. This doesn't happen to people you know. Mostly, it doesn't happen to you.

I wasn't thinking of any of this now. All I could think of was how much time I had wasted, doing improper technique and not having the right equipment when I needed it. I wanted to get her to the hospital as fast as possible. Surely they could make a miracle happen there.

Someone told me I could not ride in the ambulance.

"You and Nicki take the car and follow us. There is no room in here for anyone to ride."

Pat said, "I will go look for Greg."

One of the deputies called dispatch to send a patrol car to find Greg. (Months later, Greg shared with me that he did not know why the sheriff had come to get him, except for the fact that someone in the family was in the emergency room) He thought maybe his Mom was having trouble breathing because she has asthma or maybe one of us had broken our leg.

The ambulance backed slowly, awkwardly out of our long driveway that Greg and I could back out of with our eyes closed. If ever there was a time I wanted to yank someone from behind the wheel and do it myself, that was it. The sheriff car left behind the ambulance. Nicki and I backed out last.

Nicki and I drove to the hospital together. I had my left hand on the steering wheel and one pulling on the top of her shirt. We were praying fervent, loud prayers. Every memorized prayer we knew. The ambulance seemed to be driving so slowly. I kept thinking, don't let her die...just get her to the hospital. Go faster. Oh my God, why are they going so slow? "She must be dead", I kept repeating to Nicki, "Otherwise they would be going faster."

We only had to drive two to three miles to reach the hospital. I parked the car and jumped out even before it completely stopped. Nicki and I walked hesitantly towards the sliding Emergency room doors. The ambulance had disappeared inside doors of its own. In between both sets of those doors stood Sister Patrick Leonard Murphy, a good friend. Her face and her eyes scared me. I've never seen her look like that before. She was truly shaken. Cassie had been one of her first fledgling volunteers when she was just in 5th grade. Sister, used to pick up Cassie and Nicki and take them to the county rest home on the edge of town to visit the residents. They always had incredible, sometimes funny stories to tell when they came home. They enjoyed their time with her very much. Now she waited for us and embraced both Nicki and me as we entered the sliding doors together.

She said, "When they described the youth they were transporting on the scanner, I never dreamed in a million years it would be Cassie!"

I wandered dumbly towards the room where they had taken Cassie, but I was sent to the registration desk to sign permission forms and give our insurance information. When I went to sign the form, my hand wouldn't hold the pen. I told the lady I couldn't sign the forms, because I couldn't control my hands. They were violently shaking. I kept trying, but wasn't able to write and I kept looking past her into the emergency room I was pleading with that woman to let me go. She kindly told me just to make a squiggle line ~ I did.

We stood outside the room where they had Cassie. But they wouldn't let me in. Just then Greg pulled up and I ran outside. Before I could greet him, I had to bend over and grab my knees to catch my breath. I felt like I was going to pass out... Up until now, nothing had seemed real, but seeing his form move toward me made me realize I would have to recount the last half hour to him That made it real. When he reached me, I told him briefly what had happened. His face drained. We leaned on each other and walked inside.

He pushed his way into the room where Cassie was. Nothing was going to keep him from her. He had his hand on her leg when they went to shock her. He said he felt the shock, but did not move his hand. The priest was in there to give her the Last Rights - A Catholic sacrament administered to the seriously ill and dying. It was at that time, they got a pulse. We thought that was a sign she was going to pull through.

By now it was late evening. She was in critical condition, but they finally got her stabilized enough to put her into an ICU room. She was in a deep coma. Doctors went in and out. Finally, her doctor came out to talk with us. He is a quiet, gentle man. He always had a good bedside manner with children. He had taken care of Cassie since the day she was born. He and his family lived up the road from us. His pig, Frances, would always get out of her pen and she would be in the middle of the road sometimes when Cassie, Nicki and I went for walks.

He didn't seem like our neighbor now. He came out of the ICU area looking exhausted and tense. He searched our faces as he told us our daughter had tested positive for meth.

His words bounced off of me. I felt cold. We all stood in a numb row. This wasn't happening. There had to be some mistake. I talked to her about drugs every day from the time she was in junior high. We did not use drugs. We were adamant about drug use. We went to drug talks together and attended church every Sunday. People like us don't have kids who use drugs. Country towns like ours don't have drugs...He left us to our numb disbelief to digest what we couldn't even chew... I knew he would be back to tell us he was mistaken. Wait a minute...I thought; someone must have slipped Cassie the drugs. That must've been what happened. Well, we would deal severely with whoever had given our baby girl drugs.

The police chief had been sitting quietly in the waiting room. I wondered what she was doing there. The drug task force arrived. Everyone was asking questions. The doctor or hospital must've called them. The drug task force agent asked permission to search Cassie's car and bedroom. They left immediately. Later I learned that they had found nothing.

The waiting rooms and hallways started to fill with Cassie's friends. They slapped us with the truth that we wanted to deny. Cassie had been using Meth for a year and a half. I was cold to their tears and their apologies and even though they kept vigil outside of the intensive care unit, I remained in a disbelieving, angry distance from all of her mends - The very ones who I welcomed into my home, the ones who sat on my bed and visited for hours at a time, the ones who ate meals with us and had been like one of my own, the ones I trusted, had used drugs with my daughter. The others standing there had known the truth, but did not tell us.

Greg's family was on their way from Billings. My family from all over the country had to be called.

People were kind. They brought us food and coffee to the private waiting room, but we didn't take any. I remember not being able to even swallow water. I had terrible anxiety attacks, one after another. My entire body felt cold with fear. I shook and trembled, as I awaited my daughter's fate. I couldn't sit still. None of us could. We paced. We looked into each other's expressionless faces. Time was moving so slowly for us now. Hours went by one second at a time.

The heart specialist came out half way through the night. His face was very strained. He had a heavy accent and it was hard to understand him. He wanted to shock Cassie's heart to stop it because it was beating too rapidly.

We had never heard of such a thing: deliberately shocking a heart to slow it down and maybe stop it. Later, when things quieted down, the doctor explained that Cas had blown out the bottom of her heart and that the damage could not be repaired. He said if she recovered she would always be weak. She would never be able to go up a flight of steps,

workout, and run or exert herself. The other doctors told us if she came out of the coma she would need months and months of rehabilitation. We asked, "What would you do if it was your daughter?"

Hastily he replied, "I would shock her." He urged us to hurry with our decision. Reluctantly, we agreed to let him do the procedure. We paced the halls, passing each other, but no one spoke. It felt like my nerves were exposed on the outside of my body. I couldn't talk. I couldn't stand people's touch. He came out a half hour later, looking strained but satisfied with his work and said the procedure was successful. Again I thought this was a sign she would survive.

The next morning I felt "rescued" when the emergency flight team came and prepared her for the trip to Billings. They had to change many tubes and transferred all of the equipment to their portable system. It was a great effort between the two teams. I had felt relief to know we were going to a bigger hospital.

The maternity nurses let me use their shower. All of the items they brought me to shower with were for babies. I let the hot water penetrate into my soul. Everyone in here was having babies, I thought, I was losing mine... Someone brought me some warm clothes and my purse. I was ready in a few short minutes. I waited with some administration personnel from the hospital who were friends. They were very caring. I believe I could've asked them for anything at that moment and it would have been delivered.

As a family, we decided that I would fly with Cassie, and Greg would drive the rest of the family to Billings. It was starting to blizzard. We embraced each other and left

It was so cold outside and the snow was coming down in big, thick chunks. Heaven was purging snow. I prayed for my family driving in this. You couldn't see a foot in front of you.

The flight team and the ambulance drivers worked quickly. They put Cassie in the plane first. They had her so bundled, and you could see she was a cocoon of tubes, IVs and blankets. I worried she wouldn't be warm enough. Even though they had her wrapped well, the blankets were those thin kind with the little holes in them. I wanted to sit in the back with her, but they couldn't let me.

I got into that tiny plane. Strangely, I was without fear. I had been filled with hope that going to a larger, more sophisticated hospital would give us our daughter back. They strapped me into a very small fold down seat at the back of the plane. Everyone was smiling big, bright, comforting smiles. I got my rosary out and started praying intent prayers. No one spoke. They just kept smiling all the way to Billings.

I stared out the window as I prayed. The blizzard outside seemed insulating and safe. My mind kept altering between my prayers and my thoughts. I couldn't take my eyes off of the long, sleeping white bundle. I embraced this time alone with her.

I was ready to face months of rehabilitation with Cassie. I didn't care what parts of her were left. I only cared that she didn't die. As I stared out at the huge flakes, I started making mental notes of what we could do to speed her recovery. We could sell our house to pay expenses and get a small apartment somewhere. Of course, I would quit my job and help with her therapy. I would read up on whatever condition she was left with. We would make it as a family, I decided.

We were only in the air a half hour. An ambulance was there to meet us. We went to St. Vincent Hospital, where they whisked Cassie away.

Part II

The first person to greet me was Sister Monica, a slight woman, who was a surgical nurse from Ireland. She had a lovely, comforting and very obvious, Irish accent. She was a friend of Sister Patrick Leonard Murphy. Sister called her and asked her to give us special attention. And that she did. She remained with us for the duration of our 10-day stay.

Sister Monica was someone special. She had a gentle, kind demeanor. But what I remember most about her was her way of relaying information. Verbally, she would explain medical terms so that we could understand them. But it was as the long days wore on and we were desperately searching for answers that the busy doctors were reluctant to give us, Sister would communicate to me with long, penetrating gazes. She would tell me with her eyes what she was prohibited in words.

Sometimes when she gave us "nursing-update-information," about a needed test, after the hours we had to wait for the doctors' opinion, she looked at me with those deep, penetrating eyes and told me the truth. I could feel my body brace itself as it let those eyes penetrate into the brain, where the message would be locked away from my heart. It was through those eyes that I was eventually able to accept the truth about Cassie's condition. It was through those eyes that God spoke to me to say Cassie's would be with Him.

People started to fill up the waiting room. The first ones there was a good friend of Cassie's and her Mom. They had started country school together in third grade. When the girl moved, the two friends took turns over the years spending weekends and vacations at each other's house.

At some point, when the mother discovered Cassie used drugs, she confronted her, about her drug use. Cas told her she would quit. The daughter told Cassie they couldn't be friends anymore if she did drugs. She even wrote her a letter. She told me later that she thought she had that kind of leverage because they were such good friends. She shared a year later that until she did a report on meth at college, she did not realize how it controlled the mind and how powerful and addictive it was.

In the waiting room the mother was crying. She told me she knew of Cassie's drug use. She apologized for not calling me. It was like she hit me with a two-by-four. I found out a lot of adults knew, kids too... No one picked up the phone. I had to work on forgiveness for this. I blamed myself too, for not knowing. After all, I had helped to put on a workshop in April with members of the Drug Task Force to train senior volunteers on meth. It was the first time I had learned anything about the drug and how dangerous it was. I remember the trainer saying, with such impact, to the seniors in the room, "If I lit meth in some foil, and you started to smoke it, you would push your own grandchild out of the way to finish it. It is instantly addictive."

I remember going home and asking Cassie what she knew about meth. She comforted me and hid the truth, "It was everywhere." Cassie told me she could leave and be back with any drug in three minutes! And that a lot of kids tried meth.

"But don't worry Mom, You taught me better than that," She lied, "I would never use that stuff."

The rest of the family arrived, making the trip to Billings in record time. They told me the roads had been terrible and the ground blizzard kept them from seeing a few feet ahead on the road. I updated them on Cassie's condition and what happened in the past two hours. Doctors started arriving.

One of the many specialists told us that Cassie was in a deep coma. He was careful not to use the word vegetative; he wanted to give us hope. I thought he wanted to allow himself that same hope. He said if the brain did not respond in 10 days, it would not respond at all. We asked about her heart and the heart doctor carefully explained that if she recovered, he would take care of the heart. But the greatest problem was the brain. The brain waves had decreased and continue to decrease with every test. He said, "We needed a miracle."

Cassie's boyfriend of three years was there. He was a tall, handsome, boy, with blue eyes and blonde hair. We told him he could not sit with Cassie at night unless he got himself some help. He agreed and sought a youth minister, who was there every day to counsel him. We saw amazing transformation in him. He spent nights with Cassie. We hoped that hearing his familiar voice and feeling his presence would rally Cassie to our world again. We were sure that if we exercised forgiveness and love that the Lord would give us back our daughter.

We attended mass daily in the little chapel downstairs and prayed the rosary every day with family and friends. Teens who didn't know the Lord came to know Him. Protestants got on their knees and prayed the rosary with us. We were surrounded in prayer, comfort and compassion. Nuns who were my teachers in high school more than twenty years before came to pray with us. Everyone offered sacrifices for Cassie. We felt the prayers of those hundreds and thousands of miles away. The hospital became a safe hostile for the wounded mass of those who loved Cassie.

The waiting room had up to 50 people a day. They brought balloons and stuffed animals, pictures, flowers, cards, letters, money and food. Faxes started arriving. We read the e-mails as if we were reading the answer to our situation. All of these kindnesses insulated us from our pain. All of these people kept us coping with the situation. People we barely knew or didn't know at all came to share their stories. Slowly, shockingly, we became aware of the many, many individuals who were using this drug.

A journalist, Elaine, at the newspaper where Cassie worked, wrote a series of articles about Cassie's condition and the epidemic of meth in our community. She told the truth about Cassie's drug use and her condition. Many people responded to the newspaper and to us.

Cassie's boss, Dawn Dee set up an e-mail account. This gave the community a way to be apprised of Cassie's condition. We couldn't handle the 30 calls a day that were coming into the waiting room. We were exhausted.

We eagerly read the printed e-mail and faxes that were overwhelming the nurses at the front desk. They gave us a big medical chart binder to put them all in. We passed the binder around. E-mails came from all over the country. Churches who didn't know us prayed for us. Young people, parents and distant acquaintances were all holding us in prayer. We read them to Cassie. Everyone spoke of faith.

Eventually our situation started to sink in. On the third day, we had been at the cafeteria with some friends. You don't think you would eat in a situation like that, but we agreed early on that we may be there for months and that we needed to take care of ourselves by showering and eating at least once a day. We wanted to believe that Cassie would need us when she woke up. Anyone who did not observe this rule could not stay.

Someone came running down to tell us Cassie's eyes were opening up and she moved her head slightly to one side. We ran upstairs. I gave thanks as I was rushing upstairs. I knew she would wake up and God would use this as a learning experience for many of us. It would be the time we would look back on as the time we almost lost Cassie. It would be, by all accounts, the scariest time of our lives.

Rumors spread back home. Adult members from the community gathered in churches to conduct services with the kids. Someone videotaped one of them for us. It was beautiful but sad to see all of those young people searching for something in which to believe.

It didn't take long for the doctors to explain that what had happened was an involuntary response. The base of the brain was still alive. It was communicating with us through convulsions, tremors, high fevers, chills and parted eyes. It was a conversation that would continue for days. It was an unbearable exchange between us, and Cassie. Her body was tormented and ravished, beaten up and abused. Without this conversation, we would have been unable to let her go...

We read to Cassie from the Bible. We read her the e-mails. We talked to her and made many promises. We hugged her, cried, kissed her, bought her things and surrounded her with pictures, flowers, anointed her with holy water and poured tenderness into her care.

We agreed early on to let all of the teens there to take turns and visit her as much as they wanted. We asked them to talk to her, sing, read, joke around and to be sure to pray with her before they left the room. They did. They cried. Some told us of their own drug use and we talked to them of resources and recovery. We called parents to tell them their children were using with our daughter. *Denial is an amazing thing. We cling to it. Denial allows us to not condone what we cannot morally accept. Parents have this trait mastered.*

At some point we knew we could not force ourselves onto the families, only give them the precious information to keep them from being in our shoes. One father in particular who loved his child very much stood with me down the hall from the waiting room. We were friends. He loved Cassie. At one point in the conversation, I remember grabbing him by the coat and begging him to listen to what I was telling him. His child was in trouble. He began sobbing and walked away.

We had been there several days when the doctor came in and examined her; he explained that her brain stem was still functioning. It was the brain stem, which was creating involuntary movement, the kind of movement we were seeing from the eyes and head. We learned the term "doll eyes." The doctor cupped his hands along side of Cassie's head and gently moved it back and forth. Her eyes rolled with the movement like a dolls. You could see her opened eyes were vacant and that her body was not housing her spirit anymore.

I kept reflecting on how I did the CPR on Cassie. It was my fault she was so damaged. If Greg had been there, surely his strength and skills would have saved her. I shared this in the hospital with my good friend Shirlee who is an EMT. She told me that if a team of surgeons were in the bathroom with Cassie, they could not have saved her. She said that our call is an EMT's worst nightmare. She said it always goes through their minds, "If we would have been just another few minutes, the patient wouldn't be alive." I was so thankful for her confiding that to me. It helped me to come to terms with Cassie's current state.

We came to the acceptance of our daughter's fate at different times throughout those days, as we continued to pray for a miracle. By the sixth or seventh day, we were fully aware that we were not going to get one. At that point, my husband and I knew we had to make a decision about taking Cassie off life support.

We asked Nicki, our daughter, what she needed to survive this. She said she needed truth. She needed her Dad to gather everyone in the waiting room and get everyone to the same place that we were. She said she was hearing a lot of misinformation on the phones and in conversations. We agreed.

Greg gathered everyone together, explained the medical aspects of Cassie's condition and asked for questions. Our friend, Debbie, a medial technician was able to explain things that Greg could not. It satisfied Nicki.

During that time we were sitting with many people in the waiting room. There were several groups in circles. I was in one, Greg and Nicki in another. Someone was talking. Suddenly, Cassie was in front of me. She had on her jeans and a white t-shirt. Her hair was in a ponytail. She was walking down a long tunnel. There was a light at the end of it. She had an aura of soft light around her. She turned to me, caulked her head to one side, smiled and waved, "See you in a little bit Mom."

My faced must have dropped, because my husband looked at me in alarm and said, "Do you think something is wrong with Cassie?" I don't know how he knew that. I nodded my head yes, but could not get up. He shot up and into her room. He came back and spoke softly, "She's the same."

During the last days, it was hard to go into her room, because she was having such bad tremors and sweats. Her body was contorting so badly that she would stiffen and then she would sweat profusely. They told us our mere presence in the room could be triggering the attacks. We turned off her favorite CD's. Even if we stood quietly by her bed, the attacks would strike our daughter. It was unbearable to watch. It was the lower brain stem reacting to any stimulus in the room. We begged them to increase the meds to keep her sleeping peacefully. Even though we knew she couldn't feel the pain, it was agonizing to us to see her struggling.

I would tiptoe quietly into her room and mindfully tie my arms to my side so as not to touch her. I studied her contorted form. She was still so beautiful. But I could no longer feel the presence of her spirit. I knew she was gone.

A week before she was a perfect 18 year-old, looking forward to graduation and college, volunteering, coaching and getting good grades. She had room in her heart for everyone. She never judged. She was always gentle. She was such an easy child to raise. Cassie was the most loving person I had ever met. She loved to joke around. She was a Christian. She had accepted Jesus into her heart and life several years before. She attended church regularly with us and sometimes brought her boyfriend. Now, she was lying here in a hospital bed, awaiting death, because she used drugs.

And her sister, only twelve-years-old, was being drug through a situation that even the adults were unable to make sense of. We were all exhausted and it was easy to overlook someone's feelings, even our youngest daughter's. What would be the fallout from this with her - so young and innocent? How would we ever be able to walk her back to a life filled with daily joys, hopes and peace? We would start by teaching her to let people know when she needed something.

So Nicki and I had a code. When she had had enough of people, she would signal for me to take her to the cafeteria. It became hard to find time alone somewhere. There seem to

be family and friends on every floor. The entire structure was filled with people who wanted to offer their support. If we had a contact far away, it was not uncommon for them to send a representative. (We were very worried about the strain of all this on Nicki).

Of all the people in the world to come to Nicki's rescue, never in my wildest dreams did I think it would be someone with the demeanor of Hot Lips Houlihan on the TV show, MASH. She was the head nurse of the ICU unit. She was cool and detached, which I believe is a job requirement when you work with people who are severely ill or dying on a daily basis. Her name was Paula and she became Nicki's angel.

One day, Paula, "Houlihan" took Nicki aside, alone. She shared with her that she had lost a brother when she was young and her mother died when she was nine years old. They bonded instantly. After the talk, the nurse asked Nicki if she could hug her. Nicki agreed. She motioned for her to come into Cassie's room and she pulled the curtain shut. She explained, "My team thinks I'm tough, and I don't want to change that image." She pulled the curtain shut and gave Nicki a big hug from one grieving sibling to another. I believe that started Nicki's healing process. The two corresponded for months after.

Paula called a friend of hers who was a counselor. He offered to come to the hospital and check on us as a family. He said we were communicating well. He gave us his card and offered to come back again. We made it through the ordeal without calling him again, but I've thought of his kindness often.

We all came to realize Cassie's fate at different times during those ten days, Nicki waited until the end. Nicki's request was that we wait the full 10 days, and then do one more test on the brain. She said, "Remember Mom, the doctor said there was a one in a million chance she could come out of this if we wait the ten days." What parent could resist such a hopeful heart?

It reminded me of the time when Cassie was five years old and wanted a sister badly. After grace at the table and bedtime prayers, the one constant in our life was the prayer Cas would pray with the faith that only a child can muster. At the end of every prayer she would add, "And Jesus, could we have a baby? And could it be a sister? I want to share my jewelry with her."

There was never an adult who witnessed Cassie's prayer for a baby sister that didn't smile, intimidated by their own lack of faith. Everyone that knew us knew that I was unable to have children. Cassie was a miracle. I prayed with her, hoping that God would answer my little girl's prayer. Even though it was simply not physically feasible for Him to do so.

On month, I really thought I was pregnant. I had many of the symptoms. I took a home pregnancy test and it was positive. I told my husband and called all my family. I was so sure, so I told Cassie she was going to have a brother or sister.

Cassie was so excited, but of course, not surprised. She knew it was just a matter of time.

I made an appointment with a doctor and he ran a blood test. I was so disappointed when the lab called two days later.

"Mrs. Haydal," they said carefully, "We're sorry, but your test results were negative." I hung up the phone with bitter disappointment. Why hadn't I waited to tell everyone? Why had I told Cassie before I was sure? My heart was heavy.

I called Cassie to the kitchen. I bent down to her and gently told her the difficult news. Cassie, a gentle child from birth put her hands on her hips and scolded me. "No, you don't understand. I talked to Jesus, he told me we were going to have a baby and it is going to be a sister!" She stormed down the hall, crying and slammed the bedroom door.

I felt so sad for her, but I knew eventually she would pull out of it.

A few days later the clinic called and asked me to come back in for a blood test. They said apologetically, "Something must be wrong with our machines, apparently every woman in Billings is testing negative!"

Gladly I went in for another blood test. A few days later the clinic called. "Congratulations Mrs. Haydal, you are definitely pregnant!"

And now that same little baby girl who was prayed for and hoped into this world was standing at the foot of her sister's bed praying with confidence for a miracle to keep her in this world.

Nicki asked with the same faith that Cassie had had twelve years before, "Mom, the doctor said if the brain quits swelling, it will be in ten days. Please, could we wait the full ten days?"

Fighting back tears, I nodded yes. Of course we would wait. Who could resist someone filled with so much love and faith? The kind you only see in a child.

On the ninth day of tests, in a waiting room eternity, we waited our hundredth hour for the doctor to tell us if our daughter's brain was dead. I was sitting in the waiting room chair, groping it, feeling impatient as Sister Monica approached me. She was equally impatient on that day. She had just returned from yet another quest for the doctor. She was unable to hide her annoyance with him. She bent over me and looked into my eyes. "The doctor will be here in a few minutes." She did not break the gaze into my eyes until she was sure I understood with her eyes what the doctor was going to say. She knew I couldn't wait for another second. I held her stare and nodded that I understood. My brain understood. Every cell in my body understood. Grief filled my body. I knew immediately what was being asked of me.

Before the machines were unplugged, I wanted to make sure Nicki understood there was no other option. My tender child of twelve and I stood at the end of Cassie's bed. I wanted to see where Nicki was at with all of this so I said to her, "Nicki", I said, "When I look at your sister, I see sleeping Cassie."

Nicki shook her head adamantly from side to side and with solemn eyes she responded, "No Mom, I see sad Cassie." Nicki had reached the same sad place where we were. We prayed and cried and decided as a family to turn off the machines. We would do it the next day.

That evening we asked all of the relatives and teens wanting to say goodbye, to do so then. The next day would be spent in privacy with just immediate family. We felt we had been very public up to that point. But the day of her death, we wanted it to be just us.

The nurse came in Cassie's room. She shared with us, "To work up here you have to be tough, if you can't check out at night and go home and leave this all here, you won't be able to survive it. But there isn't one of us that hasn't gone home and cried for your family, especially your daughter. Although we are trained not to become involved, we could not remove ourselves from your situation." She said sadly looking at Cassie, "There is not a nurse in the ward that hadn't been affected."

It was quiet during the drive to the motel. We wanted to stay the last night with Cassie, except Nicki needed to be removed from the environment. She needed us to be with her. I would have never guessed I would leave Cassie's side. But I knew her soul was already in the hands of Jesus. The girl I raised and loved was already gone. When I was alone in the room with her, I sensed her body was only an empty shell. As a mother, I knew I was supposed to go with Nicki. My heart ached for her. How would she bear this loss? How could we shield her from this pain? It would start tonight. I prayed for her. I asked Cassie to stay with her. I believe to this day she stays with Nicki, praying for her and looking out for her.

Grandma and her sister, Rita offered to stay with Cassie, so we chose to go to the motel, which a friend had donated. I was so thankful that someone who loved Cassie so much would remain with her.

My sister, Alice went with us. She is twelve years older than me and much like a mother. She was good at sitting, waiting and not talking unless she had something important to say. That was important then. My little sister, Kim, had left that morning. Mother of five, she needed to go home to get hugs, but she assured me that she would return in a few days for the funeral. Her soft, cuddly baby, Jacob was with her. Every morning she would dress him and say, "Come on buddy, let's go to work." It was his job to be held and make everyone feel better. He was very good at his job.

We arrived at the motel numb, aching and unable to force even the weakest of smiles for the staff that had embraced us with such kindness and warmth. As we entered the lobby, one of the staff approached us knowingly. She told us softly that there were two large

plastic containers that were waiting for us behind her desk. We were so surprised when she drug them out. They were large enough to fill the back seat of a car. We just stared at them stupidly and then at the same time we all bent forward and grabbed an end.

We opened them as soon as we got to the room. We were so surprised when we lifted the lids. They were filled with clothes, blankets, food and best of all, cards from the children at Nicki's school. The generous care packages overwhelmed us. My sister was intrigued by the kindness of our community. Once again, people had provided comfort at a time when we thought we couldn't be comforted. This was only the beginning to the acts of kindness we were about to encounter. We had no idea what was waiting for us when we returned home.

We laughed and cried as we read each other the cards. I learned something about grief that night, through the homemade cards of the children. It doesn't matter what you do, as long as you do it with sincerity. A crayon and a piece of construction paper. . . the perfect tools in which to express one's self. It took a couple of hours to share the contents of that box. We took a lot of it up to the hospital and shared it with other families.

The next morning we woke up early and we went directly to Cassie's room. We each took a lot of time with her over the past 10 days, but today seemed like we couldn't love her or talk to her enough. The clock seemed to be ticking louder and faster today. I felt desperate to go with her on her death walk. It was unthinkable that she would go alone. Like sending a child off to the first day of school by themselves.

I would have left earth forever just to wrap my arms around her and walk with her one last time, to look into those soft brown eyes and smile. When I would see that she was ready, we would start our walk to Heaven's gate. We would hold hands tightly. We would have talked with her along the path and I would tell her she would never be forgotten by any of us. I would express to her that she would be loved into eternity and that loving her and being her mother would be the greatest gift I would ever know.

When we reached Heaven's gate, I would be unable to release her. I wouldn't leave her side, until I could feel Christ pulling her gently from me and wrapping His own arms around her. I would then turn away. I would wait until I heard His reassuring voice saying that she would remain in His care, and His alone. I wouldn't take my eyes off of her until her own eyes told me she was happy to be where she was.

I would search Christ's eyes until I could find the forgiveness for failing Him as a parent. For not seeing the signs He had sent me the signs I could've acted on to save the precious child He entrusted to me.

I would start to walk away and then I would turn and run to them and hug them both deeply and softly the kind of hug that would last a lifetime. I would hug Cassie so intensely, that my heart would leave my body and enter hers. I would drink in the smell of Heaven and watch as they both turned and leaned into each other, smiling and chatting and walking towards Heaven's light.

Eventually, a nurse entered the room and asked if they could have us move to the waiting room so that they could bathe Cassie. Everyone nodded and was willing to comply. I signaled to Greg with my eyes that I was staying at the edge of the room, off to the side of the folding screen to watch the nurses. He took Nicki and left the area.

The nurse began a ritual, which one could tell had been practiced and perfected hundreds of times. Except today, instead of one nurse bathing our daughter, four nurses entered the room. Everyone who was free pitched in.

I stood paralyzed with tears streaming down my face as I witnessed a scene so filled with love and tenderness that I could not believe what I was seeing. Each knew their job and went about it in silence. It was as if they were bathing their own child for the last time. They changed her bedding and clothing with the kind of rhythm that comes only to those who had worked together for years. You would have thought they were readying a queen for coronation.

I put my hand over my open mouth. Tears streamed down my face and my body started to quietly convulse. My thankful heart filled with love and gratitude for each of them. They anointed our daughter with the tenderness of their actions. Not wanting to be discovered, I turned and left.

When I arrived at the waiting room, it was full of people again. Even though we had requested to be alone, no one could stay away. I understood.

When the bath was finished, they would take Cassie off of the machines. Sister Monica would be in there with her. I felt like Cassie was safe with her. It seemed like we were in that waiting room for hours. Finally, someone came and lead us to her room. I felt as if we were being drug by an imaginary rope. I wanted desperately to be back in the room with Cassie, but I knew the closer I got to her room, the sooner it would be time for her to die.

As we entered her room, I could not take my eyes off of her. No one could. The child, beautiful from birth had returned to herself again. All of the machines, tape and tubes that had consumed her, were gone. They left swollen, crooked lips, abrasions and a rash. They had ravaged the face of the sleeping beauty without her knowing it.

I stared at her as the nurses told us she could last for hours or days, but her Dad and I were prepared to stay for the duration.

It was through great pain that I brought Cassie into this world, but it did not begin to compare to the pain of the next few hours.

Cassie looked so much better without all of those machines. Her hair was combed and clean. Her clothing and bed sheets were crisp and neatly folded. She didn't look as fragile as she did with all of the apparatus on her. My eyes stopped surveying Cassie and

focused on Sister Monica, who was holding Cassie's jaw shut. She had her head tilted back as if she was going to give her CPR. She explained that when she let go of Cassie's jaw, that the tongue would slip back and create a rattle. We all stiffened and prepared ourselves for the imagined horror. But, nothing, nothing, could have ever readied us for what happened when Sister let go of Cas' chin.

Cassie struggled noisily to breathe. I fell to my knees and started the rosary. I was horrified to watch my daughter struggle to breath. Sister joined my prayers, then the rest of the family. I lowered my voice and desperately tried to surrender myself to what was happening. When we finished our prayers, I rose from the floor and lay on the bed with Cassie. I held her in my arms. We all held her. We kept whispering all we longed to tell her.

We made fervent promises about caring for her sister and each other. I sang to her. The lullaby I used to sing her and Nicki when they were babies. Her Dad rubbed her arms and legs. Nicki put her head on Cassie's chest. Grandma cried and stroked her.

We sat intensely through the first few hours. On the third hour, someone's stomach was growling. (No one had eaten yet that day). It was Nicki. We all thought we would be there for many, many hours, so we coaxed her and Grandma to go down to the cafeteria for something to eat. We realized at her tender age, she needed an emotional break. They both left reluctantly.

When Nicki and Grandma left the room I was memorizing Cassie, wishing I could think of something special to do.

Suddenly, I straightened and asked the nurse for some scissors so I could cut a thick locket from underneath her hair. The nurse was so surprised, but her face brightened and she immediately went for the scissors. Upon her return, I thanked her and took the scissors. Carefully, I lifted the tussles at the nape of her neck. I held her soft locks in my hand and studied them. My fingers rubbed them back and forth. They were so familiar to me. Hair I had washed, cut, combed, put in ponytails and French-braided a hundred times. Trusses I watched Cassie and her friends twist, rat, spray and curl for proms and formals. Hair adorned with butterfly clips, tiaras and baby's breath. These Locks had survived the wind, rain, mud fights, gum, Halloween spray paint, sister's pulls and swimming pool chlorine. Curls, bathed in sweat after a fever, a good basketball game or a branding. Hair that had pointed straight up above her head when she jumped on the trampoline, or straight down when she stood on her hands.

I did all of the family's hair and I knew each of their heads, like a map. I can close my eyes now and extend my hands to still feel her scalp and the perfect shape of her head. Now, it was the last time I would stroke the soft locks. I slowly, purposefully cut her hair for the last time. I would place these precious locks carefully in lockets for each family member at Christmas time.

I handed the hair reverently to the nurse. She carefully sealed the envelope and set it aside. She understood how those locks would later bring great healing.

We stroked Cassie so gently and then whispered for her to let go. We promised her we would take care of Nicki and each other. We told her of the depth of our love. We prayed with her and pressed our lips to her face and bathed her with our tears. I kept my hand on her heart.

Greg looked at the monitor and said, "Look Mom. We are losing her." I stared down at my daughter, knowing I was witnessing her last few precious breathes, wanting to breathe them in and hold them inside of me and never release them, that they would always be a part of me.

We stood helplessly by our daughter's bed, watching her fade rapidly. I wanted to stop the fall of the green lines on the heart monitor. I wanted to freeze time...to step out of this moment and hold it forever. After the green line had fallen, there would be a dead child. They would take her warm body away and replace it with something cold and unfamiliar. I did not know how to face that.

Her final breaths were slow and peaceful. We wept and held our precious Cassie. I wanted to hold her until all of the warmth was out of her body. And then, we remembered Nicki and Grandma in the cafeteria. Greg pulled himself from his daughter and wiped his tears in a hard, defined motion and left the room.

He would found Nicki and Grandma and deliver the news so harsh and unbearable. He could not protect them from the searing pain with which they received it. He embraced them to act as their cushion and they made their way together to the room.

They returned, distraught, a few moments later. Pushing everything out of their way to get to Cassie's body and hold the final warmth one last time. Nicki screamed Cassie's name and sobbed. Grandma, too. It was unbearable to watch as they bent over Cassie in horror and disbelief. Sorry they had left the room. We were sorry too, but it was how Cassie wanted it. I wanted to protect Nicki from this and pull her away, but I stood helplessly aside and let her express her grief. You scream because you want to reach in and pull them back to this earth, but death turns a deaf ear to your pleas and moves quickly, taking your loved one farther and farther from you, until they are forever behind death's wall, a wall penetrable only with your own death.

I looked at my family sobbing and then down at Cassie's face and saw something amazing. I felt my heart stop. Moments earlier, her lips were swollen; her face terribly welted and sore from all of the tubes and tape. I stood in amazement. I called their attention to her face. Everyone stopped crying and looked down at Cassie. She was beautiful. All the blisters had disappeared. Her face was restored to its usual flawlessness. Her skin tone took on a bronzed cast. She looked as if it had been dusted with glitter. She was the image of peace. We looked on in awe. Cassie radiated with the presence of the Lord. The gift of her image will remain with us forever.

The nurse, who had so respectfully allowed us time with our daughter, now had to prepare her to donate her organs and eyes. We didn't stay in the room much longer. We didn't want anything to stand in the way of her organ donation. Regretfully, we pulled ourselves away from our last moments with her. It gave us great comfort to know her beauty and warmth would live on in someone else. Even in death she was able to generate a gift that would help 22 other people.

Weeks before, Cassie came home and proudly announced she was a donor. We told her that day that we were proud of her decision. We gave her a "high 5". Of course we would honor her last act of unselfishness.

We would later be devastated to learn that the methamphetamine had ravished and destroyed every organ in her body. All that could be donated was the skin and cornea.

PART III

We put on our emotional armor and went to the waiting room filled with people to tell them it was over. My sister did all the phone calling for us. The numbness filled me and remained for months. Someone grabbed me and said, "You can be bitter or you can do something about what happened to Cassie." I put a distance between me and everyone else in the world. An invisible wall went up. This would go on for over a year. We all did it. None of us really accepted that Cassie was dead. We all had our methods of escape, and I chose denial.

The ride home was the most oppressive experience I've ever had. The car was filled with gifts. Five of us were squeezed into the small car. No one spoke for 150 miles. We had all gone into the parts of the mind where nothing exists. The place where you go to block what has happened until you are alone and you can explode. We were mute with grief. Thankfully, Nicki had brought her CD player. She kept playing the theme song from City of Angels and handed it to her Dad and me to share. It was beautiful and peaceful and comforting. Nicki always does things like that. She quietly heals

I didn't know how the community would receive us. I didn't want to come home. I wanted to stay in the quiet cloister of the hospital.

The entire ten days we were at St Vincent's Hospital, it had continued to snow. It was as if the Lord insulated the earth, to shield us all from the ravages of reality.

The first sign of love from our community was significant. It was an act of love from the children. Everywhere we went, there were big plastic donation containers with Cassie's picture on it, and her story... they raised over \$600 in all. They probably would have raised a great deal more, but Greg asked them to take the jars down. We were very

humbled by that act of love. The children were so proud of what they had done. We were proud of them too.

As soon as we came home, we went to the funeral home to make arrangements. While we were gone, the town had been quietly preparing. The high school choir would sing at Cassie's services. Someone had paid for the cemetery plots for the family. We were told not to order food for the reception. The community had been calling the funeral home for days. They would take care of the food, reception hall, memorabilia and certain details of the services.

We had no idea how our daughter's death had affected the community of Miles City. When I reflect back, I'm still in awe of what people did for us. The kindnesses still continue. I will never be able to repay people with word or deed. They held us up at a time when we could not do that for ourselves.

The funeral parlor turned into a makeshift bedroom. A boy, Scottie, who was raised with Cassie had made a wrought iron lamp with a coyote silhouette at the bottom and stars punched in the rod iron lampshade so when you turn the lamp on, the heavens appear. She and he had shared many campouts, years of school, hunting trips, fights, stories, laughter, holidays, horse rides, picnics and rides in the country.

Cassie played basketball for seven years both in school and on travel teams. Her favorite coach brought in a game ball from her Freshman year. It was signed by all of the players, including Cassie. They included lots of pictures and a copy of a laminated note Cassie had written him. I was taken by how many pieces of her memory existed in other people. It gave me a great understanding of how one person affects so many in their lifetime. Even if that lifetime is short.

The memorial video was filled with about 80 pictures. How do you tell someone's life story in 80 pictures? We did the best we could. The video reflected all Cassie did in her short life: She took ballet, volunteered at the after-school program, played softball and basketball, hunted elk, deer and antelope. Caught her own paddlefish with her Dad. Listened to Hillary Clinton speak in Washington D.C. and she went to France with the French class.

Mrs. Clinton spoke at a volunteer conference. She spoke of how the soldiers in Bosnia shared food and played with the Bosnian children in the streets. It was the first time that country had ever witnessed volunteerism.

I looked over at Cassie, thinking the talk wouldn't interest her because she was only 12 years old. Tears were rolling down her face. Together we experienced D.C. We took bus tours, ate at cultural restaurants, slept in fancy motel rooms and learned history. She really loved it. Afterwards, we met her dad and sister in Cleveland, where we attended our first family reunion. It was a great time.

Her trip to France in June had opened her eyes to the world. It was a trip she had earned by working two jobs. Her friends in French Class made a poster board filled with pictures of their trip. They brought it to the funeral home. "Look at the bottom", they said. They had scribbled a quote from Cassie on the trip.

She said, "Guys, stop taking pictures of the buildings. Take pictures of the people. The buildings will always be here, it's the people that won't always be here." The girls didn't know one another hardly at all before the trip. When they returned home almost three weeks later, they were the best of friends. They vowed to all return to France together some day.

The girls shared at the funeral home that they never want to go back to France again, without Cassie. Our favorite picture of Cassie was taken by one of the girls on the trip. She is smiling a radiant smile, coming up stone, spiral steps. We put that picture above her hospital bed. It's now on her headstone. It reminds us of her climb to Heaven.

In every picture, throughout her life, Cassie is hugging someone. She didn't just put her arms around you; she hugged you with her soul. In every picture, her smile, radiance and warmth were evident.

She loved skiing, especially snow boarding. She enjoyed the Trails End Ranch Bible Camp. She had friends with whom she had formed such a bond that they would stop by from out of town whenever they were in Miles City. Some were from other states. I would learn several months later, when I took Nicki to that same camp, that Cassie's death had devastated the counselors and campers who knew her. "They continue to pray for us," the head counselor said. He struggled with his words.

Cassie went to Catholic school until 3rd grade. When we moved to Miles City from Billings, she attended the country school two doors from our home. The kids still remember the forts that they built there out of sticks, the animals in the pastures surrounding the school and the threat of using the outhouse if one more person plugged up the toilets. She was the only 5th grade girl tall enough to ever hit her head on the towel dispenser in the bathroom. One day, Cassie said sadly, "Mom, they don't talk about Jesus at this school."

She never missed a formal or prom. We buried her on the 20th of November and Winter Formal was three days later. We encouraged her friends to continue with their plans. She would have liked that. Her date decided to go alone. When they had grand march, he entered alone and had them announce, "In loving memory of Cassie Haydal". Everyone in the crowded gym stood up and applauded. I would have like to have seen that, but it was too painful to go.

She loved birthdays. On her 13th birthday, we rented a limo and she and her Grandma and all of her friends went for a ride. For her 18th birthday, we were afraid she would drink, so we took her and her sister to Billings to the fair. They had a blast. We went to the mall and shopped for school clothes. It was a great time.

The girls had many animals during their childhood. They had sheep, goats, chickens, geese, dogs, cats, fish, turtles and horses. They bottle-fed calves, helped at branding, rode horses and held soft, fuzzy chicks and geese, Cassie hated feeding the chickens and she didn't show much remorse when, one day, we found chicken feathers all over the yard. Our dog had eaten them all.

She was free with her hugs, she loved to get hugs, and when I kissed her, she would always leave her face extended to wait for two or three more. She was a great swimmer and when swimming lessons failed to work with Nicki, Cassie encouraged her and taught her to swim in one week's time.

She always waited until the last hour to get homework done, but she would spend hours writing many meaningful, deep poems that now touched us all... there were funny ones too of hunting trips with her Dad. She had a great sense of humor, and she always laughed.

Her room and car were always a mess, but she had a knack for decorating.

She looked good in everything she wore, especially red. After she died, one of the girls who went to France with her wrote a story about Cassie and how before she knew Cassie; she hated the color of red and thought it stood for anger. After she went to France with Cassie, she said the color now stood for warmth, love and laughter. I think we all feel that way.

How do you show in a few photos what her laugh sounded like, what her kisses felt like, what she looked like when she walked through the door of the kitchen with kids from the after school program or her girlfriends, (always in time for supper)? How do you relay that smile and how you felt when those brown eyes, with gold flicks, focused on you? How could we share that ray of warmth and light that was always around her? She could break any bad mood.

She loved to leg wrestle. You had to experience leg wrestling with her to understand the advantage she had over all of us. She was always acting cocky when she challenged you. She knew she would win. She had a plan...she would lock you tightly with those long legs of hers. That was the moment when you knew you were losing...she would make you beg for mercy. You could make someone smile or laugh now if you ask them if they ever leg wrestled with Cassie.

There is a precious part of the deceased that can never be extinguished. The part that lives on in the hearts and memories of those left behind. If you have experienced a good deed, been hugged, smiled at, kissed or heard kind words from, the spirit in which that act was done will live on in you and carry through you to others as you enact the same acts of kindness. Death conquers our bodies, but not our spirits.

We all dreamt of Cassie after she died. What we did not speak of during the day, we envisioned at night in our sleep. Part of our morning ritual now, after her death, was listening to each other's dreams. "I dreamt of Cassie last night..." that would start the conversation. We would look hopeful and sad at the person who was sharing their slumbered sightings of Cassie.

We would dress early every morning after her death to greet the people who had arrived early at our home. We accepted humbly, the tokens of love. The stream of food was steady. It would continue throughout the day.

People brought fancy Mexican dishes, soups, casseroles, special baked goods, snacks, pop and special coffees. The most memorable "food moment", was the night our friend dropped off the 40 lb. Prime rib. We had just finished a hearty meal. (No one had eaten all day, so it felt good to sit with family, eat something delicious and rest.) We were stuffed! The door rang. Our good friends, who were especially fond of Cas, were standing in the dark, with snow falling on them. They were cold. They held a steamy prime rib that could have fed the crew on the Nimitz. It was cooked to perfection by a local restaurant. They stayed and visited, but not too long. Visiting was still hard.

The grieving mind cannot retain much that has no meaning, so small talk is not an option. It's ok to laugh, cry, hug and listen to a grieving person, but never give advice or engage in small talk. When they left, we loosened our belts, unbuttoned our pants and made the effort towards our small white stove. We gathered around the stove, like cattle at a trough. (Cattle line up pretty matter-of-factly), we did the same. We started slicing off pieces of that prime no arid talking. We were starting our healing process one bite at a time.

Two things happened to me at Cassie's death. My faith deepened and I went numb. I could not cry for my child. I was repulsed at her death. I was infuriated at her drug use. I did not get a chance to help her. I was not ready to let her go. I didn't make her formal yet. I hadn't watched her graduate, taken her to college, made her wedding dress or held her children. I wanted her back. I could not accept her death. I could not get over the shock of her drug use.

I had asked for a private viewing. No family. No friends. I thought being alone with her would help me cry. I couldn't cry. I was so numb, I was trying to feel, but my mind and heart wouldn't let me. Surely there were rivers to cry, heavens to form and pain to show the world.

I walked into the funeral parlor alone. I approached the blue box. Nothing, nothing prepares you for the sight of your own child in a coffin. It is the most unthinkable, repulsive sight a parent can see. I studied her still form. I couldn't fix it. I couldn't help her anymore. How could I have let my child slip from me? When did this happen? Why did she take drugs? Why couldn't she tell me...ask me for help? I must be a bad mother, I thought, to raise a child who would put the most dangerous drug in the world in her body.

My God, I failed. What if we do the same thing to Nicki? I wanted to scream! I wanted to be dead, with Cassie.

I asked God, "Where is my real daughter. Bring her back. This is not happening." I begged, bargained and pleaded with the Almighty, and the still form remained. .

I took quiet inventory of my daughter. Earlier, her two friends had come to do her hair. The funeral Director smiled and shared that they visited and teased each other while they were working, as if they were all getting ready for the prom. Cassie would have liked that. I touched her hair. Then my eyes moved to her face. It was hard to recognize her now.

When the eye bank took her cornea, it caved in her eyes. She looked old. They took tissue from her arms and replaced it with plastic wrapping. I squeezed the plastic. The new sweater we bought for her was dainty, off-white and thin. It did not protect the person touching her arm from the shock of the plastic.

She wore her long jean skirt that she bought during her trip to France. Her necklace lay on top of the sweater. It was the first time I had seen it perfectly adjusted, because of the stillness. The body is always in constant motion. Even in sleep, there is breathing. I had never noticed before how the motion of our bodies creates energy in the things attached to it. Not now.

She had on all of her rings. A small, delicate rosary was carefully placed in her cold, cupped hands. Later, letters, flowers and stuffed animals would fill the area in the casket around her. They would remain untouched and be buried with her.

I boldly asked the maker of all things, "Why did you do this?" I was repulsed by her new look. I didn't want anyone to see her like this. I wanted to have the casket closed. I was upset and told the funeral Director's wife that they should close the casket. She explained that even though the donation of tissue and cornea had altered Cassie's usual look, I would have felt repulsed at the way she looked anyway. "You are suppose to feel that way, Mary, when you see your child in a coffin." She said gently.

She explained that the children and this community needed to see her for their own comfort. She explained kindly. I'm thankful she had the presence of mind to know what was best for everyone. The rest of the family would go through the same motion and wave of experience that I had. They all had to face the shock of what was left.

We welcomed the public at the funeral home on Sunday afternoon. They played the memorial video. Looking back, I realize how hard it was for the children to see someone their own age succumb to death. One of their own lay still before them. Forever. I wondered how those young minds would ever accept that.

It had been snowing outside for a week. By now the snow was pretty deep on the ground.

A man that Greg had worked with as an insulator a few years before, walked in. He had driven all the way from Minneapolis to hand Greg an envelope. The Union brothers had taken up a collection. He said "Everyone on the job was holding us in their hearts." He hugged Greg and left. He had to be on the job the next day...in Minneapolis!

The coffin was deep blue. There were gold pens to sign the coffin. Friends and family wrote final messages and signed their names. A good friend stayed after the viewing to record every Message. "Watch over us", "I'll never forget you", "I will always love you", "I can't wait until we are together again". The French teacher who went to France with Cassie wrote something in French. I didn't know what it said, but to me it sounded beautiful anyway. We read and reread those messages that she recorded for us a hundred times.

It was time to go to the Rosary. We had been at the funeral parlor for four hours. We greeted, prayed, hugged and cried and watched the video. We were exhausted. I had to change my shirt because when the mothers arrived, they wept on my shoulder and soaked my clothing.

We drove to the church in the dark. Such fear gripped me when we entered the church for the rosary. It was so full of people. I held on to Nicki on one side of me and Greg on the other as we walked down the aisle to take our seats.

Father welcomed everyone. They played the video again.

The high school boys formed a half circle and sang a song called, "Gentle Annie". It was beautiful. Our extended family, from out of town, were in awe of the tenderness and beauty of the service.

The church held 750 people that night. All of us prayed the rosary together. The Protestants, Catholics, Russian Orthodox, Mormons and the former non-believers, all knelt in prayer and participated in a ritual to find peace and comfort for themselves.

At the end of the service, we watched and held each other as all of those people filed past the casket. Every one of them stopped to memorize Cassie one last time. Some of them lay a rose inside the casket. The children were clinging to each other. They were devastated. When other parents went by, they could barely look in...that could be their child.

We all went outside to wait by the hearse for the casket. I will never forget the solemn sight of the senior boys carrying their friend's casket down the church steps in the dark. Big, cold, gentle flakes covered them. Their march was solemn, quiet and strong. The remorse hung on their faces. We shook in the cold.

Our eyes did not leave them. Our souls ached for them. I could not fathom that my daughter was in that box. My beautiful, gentle, Cassie was gone.

My brother stood behind me. My husband was on one side, my sister on the other. Nicki was in front of me. We gripped each other in unison when the casket went by. Trying to stop shivering. We were all holding each other, but the warmth of the embrace did not insulate us from the ache, and the cold grip of death on this night.

The funeral was moved from the church to Nicki's grade school gym. It could fit over 1,000 people. So the members of the parish community went to the gym and put down carpeting, set up flowers, chairs, banners and an altar to give it the illusion of a church. Students would read scripture, ushers would escort folks in, the musicians from the parish would play guitar and sing, and the high school choir would perform. It took hours of work by our community. It was beautiful.

My sister went ahead of me to the funeral home, before the services, to have some time with the young pallbearers. She had a flower for each of them. "Thank you for carrying our flower with such love." She thanked each of them, blessed them with holy water and pinned on their flowers. Tears were flowing. That was good.

The rest of the family started to show up at the funeral home. It was our last time to see our daughter. Now, the casket lid that I didn't want to leave open, I didn't want to have closed. I didn't want her to be locked inside that small dark place, alone. I tried hard to memorize her. I wanted to fill the empty space with all my love. I wanted to send with her every word of comfort. I wanted her to know I would never, never stop loving her. Finally, I reluctantly nodded to them to close the lid.

The gym was full. 1,000 people were staring at us as we paraded in. It felt awkward. We were so tired. One more service, then Cassie would be put in the ground. I was numb. I wondered how Nicki felt as we walked inside. Why did she have to go through such agony? She was only 12 years old. Why did she have to parade her grief?

The high school got out an hour early so students and teachers could attend the funeral. That meant so much to us.

The choir and musicians made the service beautiful! Their music was very comforting. Father gave a talk on drugs, which was very hurtful to us. We had asked that the services be just about Cassie's life. No drugs. He denied our request. We wanted him to talk just about her as a person. We had been public about her death and we had been honest about her drug use. We wanted to educate people, but at the funeral, we just wanted to remember our Cassie.

Her freshman year coach got up at the end and gave a beautiful eulogy. It was very hard for him, but it really added to the celebration of her life. We will always be thankful to Coach for that.

In all fairness to the priest that did the service, afterwards, we found out that because of his talk, a girl told her mother after the service that she needed help.

We did not know it at the time, but one of the TV stations from Billings was filming the last part of the funeral at the back of the room. We were shocked when we turned on the news that evening and saw our daughter's services. But several months later, a mother from the other side of the state, shared with me that the night the services appeared on the news, her young daughter, a couple of years younger than Cassie, had prepared a suicide note for her parents. She had the opened pills on the dresser. She could not fight her severe depression any longer. She was going to end her young life that very night, and then the news came on the TV in her room, pieces of our daughter's funeral played for that young girl. She went downstairs and asked her mother for help.

The ride to the cemetery was quiet. The grandparents rode with us. On the cemetery wall was a large sheet painted by her friend. "Soul mates forever. I love you Cassie. Love, Marissa".

The graveside service was brief, mainly because it was so bitterly cold outside. Father blessed the spot and presented us with the cross that was on the casket. The pallbearers formed a line and came up and hugged us one by one. Bagpipes played as we all filed back into the limousines. We went immediately to the reception to greet our family and friends. The high school friends of Cassie stayed. They could not tear themselves away.

Weeks and months after we buried her, we continued to find flowers, stuffed animals, cards and letters to her. They needed to express themselves only to her. It was private.

Most of our family left the next day; my older sister and my best friend stayed a few days to help with Thanksgiving. My friend drove from Iowa and was stranded in the snow. She missed all of the services. She was terrified of driving because she totaled her car coming out here to see Cassie in the hospital. She and her daughter were almost killed.

Her daughter, Stephani, said that she was dangling from the ceiling by her seatbelt; her mother was covered in snow, unable to breath, on the ground. They thought they were dying, but the daughter cried out, "Cassie!" She said she felt God's presence with them, and she knew they would be OK. The mother, my best friend Kristi, shared with me later, that she was actually suffocating in the snow that had been pushed inside from her broken windows. She said, "I just remained calm."

Stephani crawled outside of the window and someone stopped to help them. The next day, instead of going home, the husband brought them the van, and they continued on until they reached snowbound Montana. They sacrificed their lives to come and be with us at the hospital. Those girls were raised together. We shared holidays. They were sisters of the heart. Our friends were devastated that they missed the services, so we shared our newspaper articles and the memorial video with them. Very little to offer to two friends who had been through so much...

I took a week off after everyone left. There were bills to pay, thank you cards to write and I wanted to watch the memorial video every day to help me with my grief. We had a "Thank you" ice cream party for the students of Sacred Heart School to thank them for

their loving cards, gifts and messages. When the first group of students came in... the little ones, I tried to thank them, but their small, soft faces were looking so intensely at mine, my heart welled up in my throat and my gratitude could only be expressed by adding extra scoops of ice cream to their cones.

Part IV

I went back to work a few days after family left. I could not be alone with my grief just yet. I walked into the office and looked over at my desk. Someone delivered a candle, there were flowers saying, "Welcome back". Every day someone brought a gift. Someone called. Someone stopped in to share his or her love, stories or concern. Everyone offered to do something about drugs.

My head could not process information. My thoughts could not veer far from Cassie's death. I felt damaged and useless. I went home at 3 p.m. with Nicki. Nicki was pretty much the same way. Greg showed up early too. We spent weeks going easy on ourselves.

Christmas was soon upon us. We decorated early that year. The house was filled with angels, candles and warm sayings. It felt good to come home and plug in the tree and garland. The twinkling, soft lights reflected our fragile mood.

One night, while I was at services, Jeanette, the office manager from our dentist's office came by. Instead of exchanging gifts with each other at the office, they had decided to donate their gift exchange money to our family. The Christmas spirit was a little more alive this year. We were so touched. I will never forget that act of unselfishness, or the love they extended to us. Generous gestures such as this one, I believe, helped me to open my family's heart to the world again.

I thought Christmas would be especially hard this year, but somehow it insulated us. The snow. The serenity. The church filled with angels and Christ's peace. We wanted to do something special because we knew it would be different this year. None of us could bear the thought of standing with the other families in church on Christmas Eve. I stopped by the priest's house and told him the difficulty we were having. I asked if he would give me enough communion for our family, so we could have our services out at the cemetery. He agreed. Thankful, I took the special container holding the Eucharist in one hand and a prayer book in the other, eager to surprise the family with something special.

The family was hesitant about Christmas. No one wanted gifts. No one wanted to face the holiday without Cassie. When I told them of the idea of a special service out at the cemetery, they all stared blankly at me, but they agreed to try it... We drove to the cemetery in silence. I was indifferent to their discomfort. I was excited that I had special gifts made for each family member, from Cassie, with a locket of her hair in each one.

We lit luminaries around her grave. We read from the prayer book and took the communion. After our special service, I handed everyone his or her gift from Cassie. They all looked at me in such surprise. Each held their gift reverently, no needing to know its contents, only that there was something special from Cassie inside.

Nicki's was a small antique bottle with a chain that could have been a Christmas tree ornament. It had Cassie's hair wound inside of it. Greg's was a key chain with a small glass locket. Cassie's hair was carefully tucked in there and glued by a jeweler. Mom's was a jewelry box with Cassie's hair carefully placed in a tiny jewelry pouch. They stood in silent amazement. Everyone cried. For the first time in weeks, I felt happy.

After they opened their gifts, I was so filled with peace and contentment that I fell back in the snow and made a snow angel for Cassie and signed my name. Greg raised his eyebrows and looked at me then he let go and fell back to make his own angel and signed his name. Nicki and Grandma followed suite. Happiness and peace fell on the whole family. The next two days were beautiful because we had found a way to connect with our daughter.

Days later, when I went back out to Cassie's grave, there were several more snow angels, notes and names written in the snow. People had placed candles, statues and more notes everywhere.

Sister Patrick Leonard Murphy came for Christmas dinner with another couple. You could tell everyone was hesitant when they walked in the door. What would it be like having Christmas dinner with the "grievors"? We probably would have felt the same way if we had been in their situation. We ended up sharing funny stories and laughing. It was a very beautiful Christmas dinner.

Sometime in early December, federal agents came to our home. They were investigating Cassie's death. We offered them coffee and we all sat down at the dining room table. "Your daughter shouldn't be dead." They told us. They shared everything they could about Cassie's drug use. They were in the process of interviewing everyone who knew her. They answered a lot of questions for me. They also brought a level of truth about her drug use. We developed a kinship with these men that continues today. They were parents too. They shared with us events from their own lives. They were professional. They did their job. They were compassionate and treated us with such solace.

When they left, pain seared through me. I turned to my husband. The tears that had evaded me before came easily now. The reality of her pain, loneliness and addiction was unbearable. How had she endured the unbearable hell of addiction under our own roof, without us knowing? We wept together and crumpled to the floor from the weight of the truth and the feeling of hopelessness that had come from losing a child to drugs.

In January we started to draft a head stone. We wanted something special, of course. But because of the circumstances, we decided it must carry a message that would speak to people 100 years from now.

We chose a stone wider than the normal 36" stone for a single grave. The outside is rounded and has sculptured flowers on it. It reads: Cassie Haydal, August 14, 1982 - November 14, 2000, Daughter of Greg and Mary, Sister of Nicole and on the bottom it reads, "Forever changed by your message, forever blessed by your love." On the back is our favorite picture of her coming up a spiral stairwell in France. Her face is shining and beautiful in the picture. It really captured her warmth and sincerity. Underneath her picture is a poem she wrote, called The Flame.

The Flame

Way down past the sadness,
Deep inside the heart,
There burns an ever-going flame,
From which I'll never part.
It brightens all the darkness
And dries up all the tears.
It lightens up a path in which
to walk from all your fears.
But if your flame should ever
get blown out by winds of sin,
Just stay strong, say a prayer.
And light it up again.
Some lives may be broken
And you might have to mend them,
But no matter how intense the pain,
It never helps to end them.
You may not have much faith left
From where it all once came,
But as long as there's a spark of hope
You'll always have a flame.

By Cassie Haydal, November, 1996

It took months to prepare the stone. In the meantime, the funeral home put a tiny copper plaque with her name and date on it. It caught all of us off guard. It was every bit as moving as the stone would have been. It seemed to seal the burial. More angel statues appeared crosses, candles, stuffed animals, single roses, and scores of letters and cards. All were frozen to the ground.

Spring was almost here and that meant the Prom would be here soon. I called Kim, one of Cas' friends, who was as tall as she was, to see if she wanted to sew a formal out of the material I had purchased for Cassie. The top was strapless leather with a v cut in the

middle. The bottom was a straight black silk skirt. We spent evenings and weekends cutting, sewing and hiding our mistakes. We shared memories of Cassie. I learned a lot. Other girls started to show up with their material and patterns. We sewed three dresses in a couple of weeks. There was a lot of eating and giggling coming from our dining room. There were only a few tense moments. Finally, prom morning, the last dress was done. Kim had short, auburn hair, and the black dress was stunning on her. Jen, with her trim waist and red-dyed bob was sensational in her green satin, and Marissa, had the perfect figure for her snake-skin-looking blue formal. It was a great idea making the dresses. I was full of new, good memories.

The girls all came to the house the evening of prom and had their picture taken together. We smiled and joked. But, when the last girl walked out the door, I turned to Nicki in the next room, who opened her arms, and I ran over and we held each other and cried. No one needed to say, "That should have been Cassie walking out of that door."

Nicki and I decided that Cassie should have flowers too. We took beautiful flowers out to her. We lit hurricane lamps and placed them on each side of the grave. We left them burning. We knew others would be out. Sure enough, the next day, the kids started calling. They had all gone out after the dance and found the lit lamps.

Nicki spent the night at a friend's house. My husband and I knew that if this night brought such emotional weight, that graduation would be unbearable. He called that night and made reservations for graduation weekend, which was also Memorial Day weekend. We would go to Lake La Rounge, in Canada. We were escaping to the North.

We left days before graduation. On our way out of town, we stopped at the cemetery to leave a note for the seniors.

Graduation morning found many seniors with mixed emotions. While we were gone, thoughtful friends delivered yellow and blue balloons (school colors) to Cassie's grave. One of Cassie's friends lay daisies (the class flower) all over and surrounded the parameter with blue and gold candleholders, attaching more daisies to each of them. She took a picture so she could share it with us when we returned home. It was very beautiful.

They all met out there at noon in caps and gowns to acknowledge their accomplishments and say out loud what wouldn't be said at the school graduation ceremony. "Cassie's not here". The kids wanted to have an empty chair at graduation service, but the school didn't want to memorialize her death. They allowed flowers from the class to be placed on the stage in her remembrance. One of her friends came to the house, to get the tri-fold folder with all her senior pictures on it. At the last minute, the principal let her put it on the stage. Some of the kids receiving scholarships didn't know it was up there. If you were sitting towards the middle and back, you couldn't see it.

One of Cassie's friends shared with me later, that when she went up to get her scholarship, she was taken aback when she saw the photos and she lost her composure. I tried to imagine her loss as she went to the front of the room to receive the largest

scholarship that can be offered to a student from our community. It should have been the happiest moment of her life. She walked up excitedly to accept her reward for hard work and determination. As she reached the front, the pictures slapped her. Cassie would have never wanted that, although it made us feel good that her friend wanted her there so much that she went through the effort.

In the meantime, hundreds of miles away, we had left the cabin to go fishing. It was freezing, so we put on many layers. I wore a jacket with a fur-trimmed hood. In the afternoon, during the time of the ceremony, I hung my head over the edge of the boat I hid my face from the family with my hood. Reality pounded itself against me relentlessly. My pain was like a searing heat, which was turning my insides to liquid. I stared into the water and willed my grief into the lake. Though we had tried to remove ourselves from the weekend's cruel reminder, the truth followed us...

As a parent, I thought I had done everything right. We went to church. We prayed at night. I would lay with the girls in the dark and they would share their intimate thoughts. We would pray for their future husbands and careers. Cassie would grab me and ask me to pray with her about a problem. I would pray with her friends when asked.

She was involved in sports, bible camp, church classes, friends, family and community. We talked to our children daily about everything we knew about drugs. At night, I would wait for Cassie by the kitchen door. I would hug her and smell her after she had been out. I was sure I would detect signs of alcohol or marijuana, if there were any. I knew my girls would never touch drugs. I thought because we were Christians, that there was a bubble around my children that other families didn't have.

I think back to freshmen year. We found out that Cassie was smoking marijuana. We took her for an addiction evaluation. They said she was not addicted to anything and she had three choices: Go to AA, work with a counselor or go to group therapy. They strongly urged her not going to group, because bad behaviors are openly exchanged there. Some of the kids were into tougher stuff than she was. So Cas and her friend both chose AA. The adults there were very welcoming and Cassie told me she was changed forever by their stories.

She always referred to her freshman year as her "wild time". I bought that. In Junior and Senior year, occasionally when something didn't seem right with Cassie, we would have long talks and she would be OK for a while. I attributed some of it to being a teen, working and going to school and being in love...But weeks before she died I questioned her about her dark circles, her weight loss and her absence from home. I begged her to tell me what was wrong. I asked her several times, and then I took her to the doctor twice. The first time was three weeks before she had the massive heart attack. The second time was just three days before November 4th.

I went to high school in the 70's. Some of the girls had anorexia. One girl died. Could that be what was wrong with Cassie? She had a good appetite and she was thin, but not skinny... I couldn't put my finger on it. I hoped that with time, the answer would be

revealed. The answer was revealed to me in pieces, like a puzzle. It spoke to me through my daughter's eyes and actions every day for months.

What I should have done, instead of trying to interpret the symptoms myself, was to take her for help and let the professional interpret the symptoms.

My parents always treated me with respect. They always made me feel that I was trusted. I valued that as a teen and I did not want to do anything that might compromise such a gift. I thought trust was everything between a parent and a child. My parents never looked through my mail, room or purse.

Some of my friends rebelled because their parents were too strict or too snoopy, so I tried to create that same rapport that I had with my parents between my daughters and me. As a parent, I used my experiences as a measure of how to discipline and raise my daughters. I thought that if I had an open relationship with my girls, they would lead with good behavior.

I believe that even though families are close and parents have close relationships with their children, that children are bound to experiment as a part of declaring their independence. When children experiment or get in trouble; it is our opportunity and our privilege to coach them and prepare them for a time when they are on their own and such circumstances arise.

If our children have friends who smoke, drink, have sex, party and use drugs, they will too. Experts will tell you that taking drugs is a 30 second decision. If children have drugs in their environment, they have a 51 % chance of using them.

If our children try alcohol, drugs and sex, do we have a plan in place that will send the message, "We love you and therefore we are going to show you the consequences of your actions?"

When our children get into trouble or make negative choices, as parents, we seem to have a problem understanding that it is not about us! It is about our children. And our actions will relay to them their boundaries and family values. We will be giving them boundaries in which to operate that will keep them safe. The experience of receiving a consequence for an action can then be used as a tool for measure when they are no longer with us.

Cassie's story is a story of drug addiction, but more importantly, it is a story about the power of healing and love within each of us. The ability each of us has within ourselves to transform. We can turn a nightmare into a miracle. We can take devastation and turn it into a life worth living. We are all damaged...

When Cassie died, all I could think of was, this only happens to other people. For the first time in my life, something devastating happened to me and to my family, but if bad things can happen in my life, I believe the good things are mine to claim as well.

Blessings are ours for the taking. We are vulnerable when we open ourselves to love. But a life without love is a life without hope.

Although a part of me died with Cassie, a new part of me was born that same day. I can't live for her, but I can carry her message to others.

I choose to remain vulnerable to love. I open my arms wide to inevitable pain. For in the greatest depths of pain exists the greatest beauty. It is where we find each other, our real selves, our Christ selves. It is where I will find Cassie.

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