

“A Servant’s Heart: Choosing to Serve”

Before I was even born my sister Shauna was a part of my family’s life, she was the fourth of what would eventually be six sisters. Shauna was born with Trisomy 18, a genetic disorder that would, with time, take her from my parents and an event that would significantly define my family for years to come. During this difficult time my parents came to depend on Hospice, an organization that assists and supports the terminally ill, and they would be forever grateful for their assistance.

By the time I was born my parents were busy raising a house full of girls (I am the youngest) but Shauna’s memory was always with us. My parents named the family business after her and we would take helium balloons with little prayers tucked inside to the cemetery and release them on her birthday, clinging to precious moments captured through the watchful eye of a camera years before.

As I entered high school life simplified with only two girls still at home (the others off at college) and my parents decided to give back to Hospice through volunteering. They asked me to come with them and work with patients who were facing extraordinary struggles and whose lives would soon end. I had volunteered in many facets in the past with my parents, we worked sandwich lines, assisted at homeless shelters, adopted soldiers, raised money for various causes and even marched on Washington together in a stand for what we believe in; volunteering wasn’t the problem, it was the unknown and the fear of the process of death and all it would entail that made this decision very difficult for me. I wanted to help my parents and be a part of their healing, but as a teenager I wasn’t sure I was ready for this. The things I would have to do, the pain I would have to witness was overwhelming...the soul searching began and I asked God for strength and guidance.

Life is full of tough choices and sometimes you have to put aside your own desires and fears for those you love and for those that might need you in an effort to do what is right. Truly giving is going beyond what is comfortable and convenient and completely putting serving above self. I took the hours of training, I asked the tough questions and eventually I was given the privilege of being a supporting member of Hospice. My sister and I, along with my parents, were certified for direct patient care and this new adventure in life was about to begin.

My first patient was a grandfather with Congestive Heart Failure who had a passion for Wii Bowling and beat me regularly. At 86 he had amazing “spunk”, a zest for living, and a lifetime of history to share. We spent our Thursday evenings together and eventually his weak heart lost the battle; he was such a delightful man with a fighting spirit that profoundly touched my life and he will always be remembered.

Remembering those that are leaving us, capturing moments that will live on after they have gone to their rest is very important. It provides peace to those that are left behind as well as

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comfort to those that are struggling. I realized the importance of just such moments as I reflected on my own family, timeless expressions that we cling to in a photograph.

I have always loved photography; it gives me a voice and a means of interpreting all the beauty around me. My sophomore year I started an artistic/portrait photography business and with time implemented a photography program with Hospice where I would capture sacred moments for the loved ones of those faced with death – cherished memories that could be kept forever. I had the privilege of capturing the wedding of a young couple in the hospital just hours before the groom's fight with cancer ended their dreams. It took hours to edit the pictures, removing the tubes and the hospital equipment and illuminating them in a glow of light that represented what that moment truly meant to them. I will never forget the look on the bride's face the following day as she sat beside her new husband's bed while he lay there in peace. Her tears and her gratefulness brought me to my knees as I thanked God for the ability to provide her with something so beautiful.

I believe that any given situation in life offers the opportunity to find beauty; although not always obvious, there is always magnificence even if only captured for a moment in the flickering eye of a lens. It is my desire to work with those who are struggling in life to step out of the tragedy for a moment and give them a reason to hope, to smile - tastefully capturing that moment with compassion and understanding so that it may be treasured forever.

Being the youngest of six daughters I have had the benefit of seeing life on a grand scale, witnessing lives mold and change around me; and I realized at a young age the importance of keeping my mind and spirit open to the endless possibilities that God places before us. I have been involved in sports most of my life, in music and community activities of all types and with photography as my voice and passion I have received numerous awards and a great deal of recognition that illustrates what has been done with God's grace and the lessons and education provided me. But all of this pales in comparison to the opportunity to share in those blessed moments that occur when touching a person's life that is struck by tragedy.

It never ceases to amaze me how positive and beautiful those facing life's greatest challenges can be. They are inspiring and their appreciation of the simplest things makes them absolutely magnificent. Between the struggles and the pain those patients and families of Hospice exemplify this and I feel fortunate to have the opportunity to be among them. Their strength gives me strength and their faith enriches mine.

After experiencing so much, my life is forever altered; it is the tough choices that we make, choosing to serve that in the end enriches us, blesses us, and makes our life and direction what it is. I am grateful to my parents for their guidance and for sharing with me this opportunity...and for giving me the choice. I never held my sister but I knew her because my parents made her real. And now, in choosing to serve, I carry her legacy with each life I touch...and that touches me.