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Relay for Life

Let's take a look at the concept of "family". How it works, how everyone relates, how the family interacts with each other. In this particular family, there is a loving mother, a hard working father, and an only daughter. The three of them have the typical family dynamic. Imagine if your whole world was turned upside down. Who would you turn to? How would you handle the situation? What would life be like if everything you lived for, your whole world, your daughter, was gone.

In the spring of 2008, my little sister, Madison, and her best friend, Tayler, decided to try out for their high school dance team. It was always my sister's dream to be a Varsity Emerald Belle, as our dance team was called. She and Taylor had been taking dance class for a few years together, and even most recently added a Drill Team class to their busy schedule, just to prepare for auditions. As the week started, and practice begun, both girls put their hearts out and left everything they had on the dance floor. On the fifth day of tryouts, Tayler began to complain about her knees hurting her; this was common due to all the jump kicks and fast paced dancing, but she seemed to be experiencing a little more in pain than what normally comes from this. Mrs. Reynolds, Tayler's mother, decided to get some MRI's done to see if maybe Tayler strained a muscle or tore a ligament in her legs.

The next day, while awaiting the results from the MRI scan, Tayler went to tryouts to just watch the other girls dance in hopes of not falling behind. By the end of the first few "go rounds", Tayler felt she was well enough to try again. By the end of that day, the lists for Varsity and Junior Varsity were posted on the door outside

the locker room. Both Madison and Tayler earned a spot on the Varsity dance team, a very prestigious ranking for a freshman to make. We had a mini celebration for the two girls that night with cookie cake and balloons and talked about our pride in all their hard work. The girls had accomplished no small feat. They had danced every day, all day for 2 weeks and made it on the varsity dance team. This was definitely something to be proud of, and by the brightness in their eyes and the energy they were giving off, we knew they were proud of themselves as well.

The next day, Mrs. Reynolds received a very worrisome phone call from the doctor's office to come in immediately. "I was terrified at first, but I thought, 'ya know what? God has a plan. It will all be alright'" Mrs. Reynolds recalled her reaction to the phone call. She was a very optimistic woman, someone who believed that everything happened for a reason, and was a strong believer in God and his work. She was given the gift of strength to get over any hurdle no matter what happened. Mrs. Reynolds was always the one saying, "it's going to be ok". The two got in the car and drove to the doctor's office to hear what the results of the scans were.

When they arrived, the doctor pulled Mrs. Reynolds aside to talk to her privately. "Mrs. Reynolds, I'm sorry that I have to be the one to tell you this. The scans came back. Tayler has Leukemia."

"My heart stopped. I was frozen. I just kept thinking to myself, 'no, no, no, this cannot be happening. She is only thirteen years old. How can *my* daughter have cancer? What am I going to do?'" Mrs. Reynolds was emotionless, not believing what she had just heard. In her eyes, the doctor had it easy just telling her the

information; but now it was her turn. She would now have to tell her only child, her blessed daughter, that she had Leukemia.

As she stood in the doctors' office with him looking over tests, Mrs. Reynolds fought back tears. In her head, she kept seeing visions of times in Tayler's life that stuck out most in her memories. She thought about the day Tayler was born, "looking into the face of a beautiful, healthy baby girl. Bringing the seven pound, four ounce baby wrapped in pink home from the hospital and the many nights spent rocking her back to sleep." Mrs. Reynolds thought about Tayler's first encounter with the Santa at the mall and "how much she hated that man; and would not sit long enough to take a picture and after waiting in the line for hours, had to leave with no Santa picture". She also thought about Tayler's first lost tooth, and her first day of school. Mrs. Reynolds thought back to all the times she and Tayler had sat on the couch watching *The Bachelor* or *So You Think You Can Dance* and how it was Tayler's dream to be a dancer on the show. All the times the two girls had sat on Tayler's bed and talked about her day at school; about the boys Tayler thought was cute and the teacher's she really didn't like. They would talk about homecoming and what kind of dress she would wear, or about the cattiness of girls. It was evident how close they were as mother and daughter. The doctor explained the options the family would have and though Mrs. Reynolds wore a strong face and looked as if she was paying attention, her mind kept wandering back to the helpless little girl sitting just outside the heavy doors.

Of course the initial shock of the whole idea was more than anybody could imagine. As the night progressed, Mrs. Reynolds continued to tell her family, "God has a plan".

As they were checked in to St. Jude's Medical Research Hospital, the family tried to keep high spirits and go through this with a positive attitude. They sat in the waiting room, "watching the clock for what seemed like hours." Finally, they were called in.

The doctor told them not to worry one bit and that they caught the cancer so quickly that this would be an easy fix. Just a few Chemo treatments and they would be good to go; the family could return to their normal everyday lives.

If only everything could be a guarantee. On April 19, 2008, Tayler Reynolds passed away. Only 3 weeks after being diagnosed.

Like anyone would react to the heartbreaking reality of the matter, Mr. and Mrs. Reynolds felt like they had nothing else to live for. Their only daughter was taken from them way to early. "A child should never pass away before his or her parent. Its just not natural" Mrs. Reynolds could not believe what had just happened. Of course, it took her a little while to come around to the fact that she would never get to do her daughters' hair for prom, or help her pick out clothes for the first day of school. She would never get to watch her little girl dance at the football games, or walk down the aisle. All of the things mom's look forward to most would never happen. "It took me a long time before I would go back into Tayler's room. Just knowing that I tucked her in every night and woke her up every morning broke my heart thinking about going in to an empty bedroom." Mrs. Reynolds started telling

me about her daughter. “Tayler just had this lust for life. She never let a moment pass; she lived every day to the absolute fullest. Tayler was the most outgoing, charismatic little girl I had ever known. And she had a heart of gold, she will make one beautiful angel”.

Not long after Tayler’s passing, Mrs. Reynolds got involved in Relay for Life, an organization that The American Cancer Society does as a “life-changing event that gives everyone in communities across the globe a chance to celebrate the lives of people who have battled cancer, remember loved ones lost, and fight back against the disease” (relayforlife.org). Mrs. Reynolds told me that that she “would never want anyone to go through what [she] went through in losing her child, [she has] to make a difference and help others to cope with the loss of loved ones”. If nothing else, she just wanted to hear others inspirational stories and laugh and share in the joy of other people’s families. “Relay for Life is more than just an organization, it’s a community of people just like you who can share in your pain and help you grow and learn to experience life again” Mrs. Reynolds told me.

Throughout the process of just being a part of this organization, Mrs. Reynolds realized that she needed to do more than just be a participant. Locally, in our small town of Southlake, TX, Mr. Reynolds decided to host her own Relay for Life in honor of her daughter as well as those in the local community who also have suffered a loss in the family. Every year since Tayler’s passing, Mrs. Reynolds organizes the event and gets the whole town involved. Each “team”, or group of people who walk for a person, sets up a tent and decorates it in honor of their loved one who either won the battle, or lost it. Each team has their own t-shirts made by a

company where all proceeds go to Relay for Life. The whole town gets in on the action. Local caterers, balloon makers, sponsors, anyone involved out side of Relay for Life, donates their proceeds directly to St. Jude's Children's Research Hospital. In the weeks leading up to the event, Mrs. Reynolds goes to local restraurants, school boards, and small movie theatres and asks that a small portion of their proceeds for the week of Relay for Life go to St. Jude's as well. It is a community effort, and everybody is more than willing to pitch in.

Mrs. Reynolds says that she has gotten so much closure on her daughter's death due to the local Relay for Life community. When the event comes around, she looks forward to meeting the children who survived yet another year battling cancer. She gets so much joy out of seeing the smiles of other little kids. Mrs. Reynolds is the most uplifting person I have ever known. She does not feel sorry for herself, but seeks to help others. She has stayed so positive throughout the last few years and continues to live life as she normally would. That's not to say she doesn't have her days where she wishes and would give anything to have her daughter back, but she is such a strong, inspiring woman. "I have come a long way. I can actually go into Tayler's room and be ok. I know she is in there and is with me every day," says Mrs. Reynolds.

I asked my sister about life at Tayler's house when she goes over since Tayler's passing. Mrs. Reynolds still has all the girls who were friends of Taylor over for pool parties, sleep over's, Tayler's birthday, and the anniversary of Tayler's death. My sister says "it used to be sad going over there and not seeing Tayler's face at the door. But Mrs. Reynolds has done such a good job of making it a happy

experience when we go over that it has really helped all of us cope as well". When I asked my sister what it is like in Tayler's room, she says, "you can see on a framed picture of Tayler's school picture, the faint remnant of lips on her face, where Mrs. Reynolds kisses her daughter before bed and whenever she goes up to her room".

Through Relay for Life, Mrs. Reynolds has been able to raise massive amounts of money to go towards research for cancer. The community that comes out for Relay for Life really has impacted Mrs. Reynolds in such a positive way. They help her grow and move on, but never forget the spirit of Tayler is always with her. Mrs. Reynolds always says that "when [she] sees a rainbow or a butterfly, [she] knows that it is Tayler". Mrs. Reynolds said that when Tayler was alive her favorite joys in life came from family, friends, rainbows, and butterflies. In fact, the high school's first football game was on Tayler's birthday. The whole game was dedicated to her and all ticket proceeds also went to cancer research. Right before the game started, on a perfect, beautiful day, the biggest, brightest rainbow you could ever imagine covered the stadium. Mrs. Reynolds teared up a little knowing that this would have been her daughter's first time dancing at the high school football game, but although she couldn't physically be dancing, she was there to support her team.

Mrs. Reynolds and Relay for Life go hand in hand in the town of Southlake. She is constantly campaigning and working towards finding a cure or raising money to help research. She has impacted our community with her efforts, just as Relay for Life has impacted her. She has come so far since her daughter's death and it was greatly influenced by the love and support of the people who all came out to Relay for Life.

