Memoirs Inspire Effort to Eradicate Human Papillomavirus

Kirk A. Forbes, BS, MBA


Kristen graduated from Indiana University Purdue University Indianapolis (IUPUI) with a bachelor's degree in business and a double major in human resources and management. She had just opened a new, exciting chapter in her life. Fresh out of college, she began a promising career with Walgreen's Drug Store in management. The very next month, however, her right ankle swelled up and she spent the next year fighting advanced cervical cancer.

I wrote her story to document Kristen's courage. She never lost her faith, her sense of humor, or the will to fight. Kristen's own journal entries, our e-mail updates to friends, and her poetry provided the framework to tell her story. Myself and my family also wanted to relate Kristen's experience with the medical community. The compassion and support of the doctors, nurses, medical staff, pharmacists, physical therapists, transporters, and EMTs were unwavering throughout her illness.

I am a reluctant author. I never intended to write a book. My son Eric was dealing with his grief by going through Kristen's belongings in the garage. He came into the house and said, “Dad, you need to come here and see this.” I followed him out to the garage and he pointed at a stack of journals that he had found written by Kristen. I had no idea that my daughter was such a dedicated writer. I spent the next week reading all 17 of Kristen's journals. Two were full of poetry and song lyrics (she played the cello and guitar) and two were about her last year.

Kristen had a little 5-year-old friend named Jacob, the son of her best friend Jeff, and she loved Jacob like a son. I thought that it may be a good idea to put together a story about Kristen in a three-ring binder with some pictures so Jacob could read it when he is old enough to understand who this person was that loved him so much. After reading her story, a good friend of mine, an author, said, “You should consider making it a book.” So I did.

When you lose a child, your mind starts searching for answers as to why . . . why Kristen, why now? Because of Kristen and our personal beliefs, we know we will see her again someday. Perhaps my next door neighbor was right when he said, “Kristen and your family have suffered and sacrificed so many others will not have to suffer and sacrifice.”

Debate exists in the United States on whether the human papillomavirus (HPV) vaccination should be mandated. The Federal Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices has made a universal recommendation that all girls be vaccinated at age 11 or 12, but this is not a mandate. Eight countries currently offer the vaccination free of charge to girls in sixth through eighth grade. Pap smear screening can identify potentially precancerous cells. Kristen had a Pap test 18 months before being diagnosed with cancer. In her case, an annual test may have detected it early enough to have led to a different
outcome. Any interval longer than a year could be critical for many women.

So what is Kristen’s family doing to battle cervical cancer? We have set up a Web site for Kristen at www.kristeneve.org. We have formed the Kristen Forbes EVE Foundation. Eve is the name of the first woman, but EVE also stands for Educate, Vaccinate, and Eradicate. The goal is to educate people about HPV, the HPV test, the vaccine, and other testing and treatments that are available. Cancer has touched everyone who reads this article. This is why Kristen’s story is everyone’s story. The goal is to someday be able to lift our glasses in a toast when the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention announce that cervical cancer has gone the way of polio, measles, and smallpox: eradicated!

Reader Reaction

Heartbreaking and inspiring, I’m so grateful to Kristen’s father for sharing her story. Kristen’s journal entries illuminate the fears she experienced on discovering she was facing cancer and the subsequent struggles she worked through. I frequently found myself in tears as I read, but more often I was inspired by the hope and faith that Kristen demonstrated as well as the love exhibited by her family and friends. The world was blessed to have her. Kristen was so young to have been taken from this world, but in those short years, she clearly lived more fully than many.

Michael Smart, RN, BSN, OCN®

The death of such a young girl made me angry; it didn’t need to happen. When I hear parents not wanting to give their daughters the HPV vaccine, I just want them to read the book and then decide.

Susan K. Steele-Moses, DNS, APRN, CNS, AOCN®

Love, Kristen is a good reminder of the strength of the human spirit and how much we can learn from our patients and families. I especially liked the poems and prayers in the back of the book.

Karen K. Swenson, RN, PhD, AOCN®

I love seeing Kristen’s poetry and the messages that her parent decided to include in the book. As an oncology nurse working in that area for many years, it left me with lots of questions. It made me want to see more education on HPV and cervical cancer.

Debra L. Winklejohn, RN, MSN, AOCN®, CNS

I am very thankful to Kirk Forbes for sharing his daughter Kristen’s life story in the poignant book Love, Kristen. This book is a celebration of Kristen’s short-lived life. Kristen’s journal entries and her poetry vividly demonstrate an insightful wisdom beyond her years. Her spirituality and astounding bravery fighting cancer is a reminder to all that life is a fragile gift that should not be taken for granted. Kristen’s radiant smile and love for life jumps off the pages and touches the essence of the soul. This book is an educational tool for professional caregivers and a vehicle for family members who lose a loved one to cancer to understand that they are not alone in their grief. I will keep this book by my bedside to open when my spirit needs nourishment and courage. On clear nights I will look up toward the southern sky to find Kristen’s star and have heartfelt gratitude that she touched our lives in her earthly presence and that she will always continue to illuminate our lives from the heavens.

Nancy Jo Bush, RN, MN, MA, AOCN®

I am honored to have worked with Kirk to share some of Kristen’s story in this article. Although it is sad to read about young lives cut short, I experienced healing for my own grief through Kristen’s story. I got a better sense of the other side of cancer—the patient and family perspective. I’m so inspired by Kristen and her family for sharing in this way.

Barb Henry, APRN-BC, MSN

Cervical Cancer and Human Papillomavirus

An estimated 11,270 cases of invasive cervical cancer will be diagnosed in the United States in 2009, with an estimated 4,070 women dying from this disease. Cervical cancer was once one of the most common causes of cancer death for women in the United States. However, from 1955–1992, the cervical cancer death rate declined 74%, mainly from the increased use of the Pap test. The death rate from cervical cancer continues to decline by nearly 4% each year (American Cancer Society, 2009). Virtually all cervical cancers are caused by exposure to one of four types of the human papillomavirus (HPV): 6, 11, 16, or 18. According to Saslow et al. (2007), use of the HPV vaccine will reduce cervical cancer incidence by 70%.

For more information about cervical cancer, please visit:
• American Cancer Society: www.cancer.org
• Infection Control Today: www.infection controltoday.com
• U.S. Food and Drug Administration: www.fda.gov

References