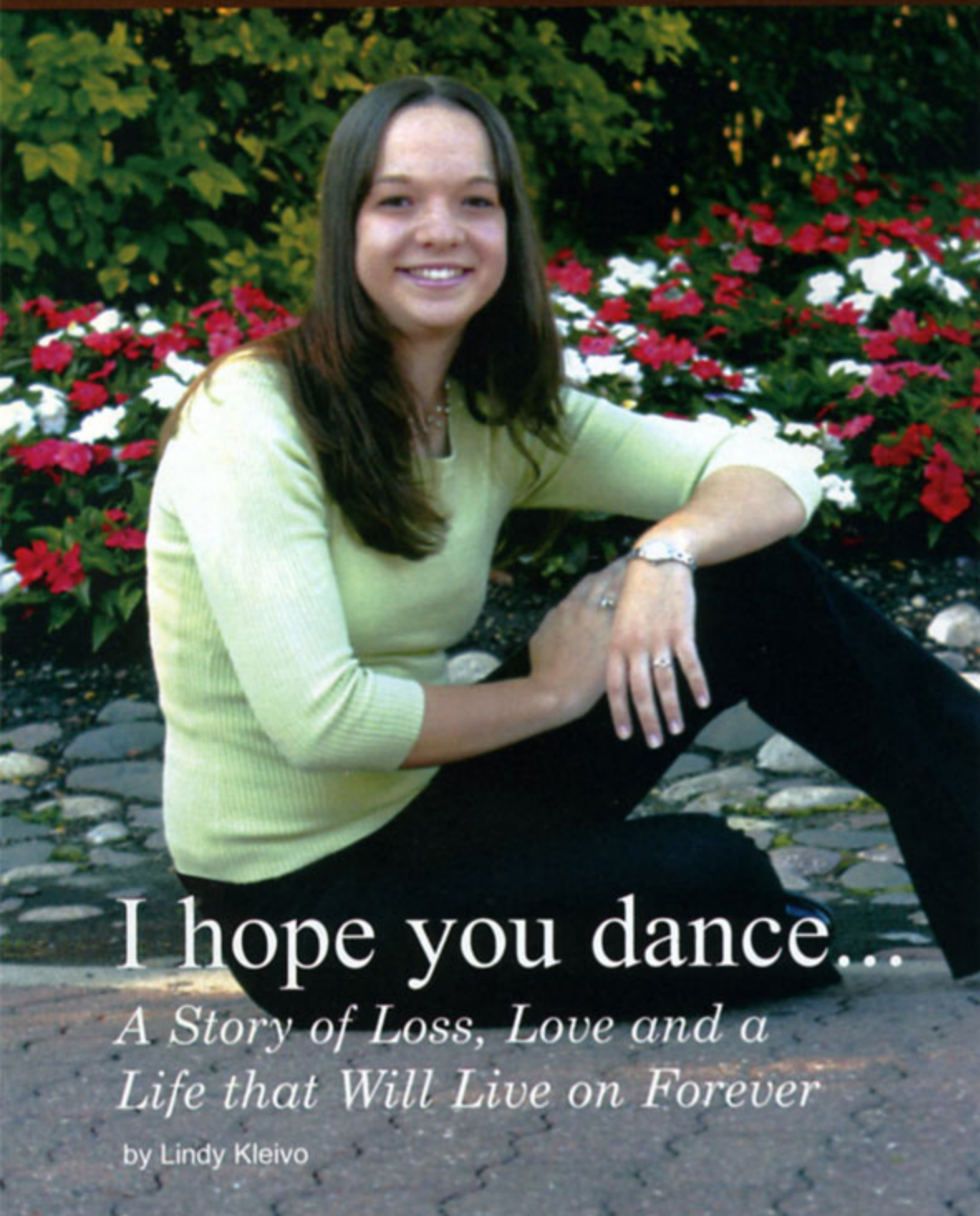


Picking Up the Pieces



I hope you dance...

A Story of Loss, Love and a Life that Will Live on Forever

by Lindy Kleivo

The sun was shining brighter than usual on this late fall afternoon. Though the trees were bare and the air was brisk, the sky was graced with beautiful clouds - so delicate, it seemed as if they were dancing above us.

Residents all over town were busy planning for the Thanksgiving holiday, which was just days away. It was November 20, 2005-- a Sunday. But for Kathryn Bender, a 17 year old Naperville North senior born April 15, 1988, it wasn't any ordinary Sunday. Today was a day that she had been eagerly preparing for. She was scheduled to perform a dance routine at 5:00 p.m. with her ballet performing group. The dance showcase was taking place at Waubonsie Valley High School where Kathryn's group was to showcase their dances along with other dance teams in the area. This would have been a routine under the direction of Steps Dance Center in Naperville, where both Kathryn, her older brother Nicholas and her older sister Elizabeth had been involved in dance for several years. Kathryn was enjoying teaching young children the grace of dance through ballet. In fact, Kathryn's plan was to continue dancing long after she graduated, as she applied to and was accepted at Northern Illinois University. She was to study Elementary Education with a minor in dance. According to her Mom, Doris, "Kathryn was thrilled to pieces, but still a little afraid. She had never been away from home, really."

Doris Bender, a teacher at Naperville's Beebe Elementary School since 1994, made plans to attend the showcase with Kathryn's grandma who lives next door to the Benders in downtown Naperville with Kathryn's grandpa. The three of them got in the car and headed for the showcase. Kathryn, always caring and helpful, insisted on taking the time to help her grandma walk into the school. Before she ran off to meet up with her dance group, Kathryn turned one last time and waved goodbye.

Doris, along with her and her mom, were excited to see the routine her youngest child had been practicing for and patiently waited for her to take the stage- a favorite pastime of Kathryn's ever since she was a toddler, Doris recalled. As she sat thinking back to yesteryear, the nurturing mother of three was unaware that within moments, her entire world would shatter into a million pieces, and would never again be the same.

Suddenly, Doris heard one of Kathryn's friends screaming from behind the curtain. The audience members sat still, yet alarmed, each looking around at one another, praying silently it wasn't their child in danger. backstage. Kathryn's friend ran out and yelled for Doris to hurry back- "Something terrible has had happened to Kathryn," she frantically yelled. Her friend had fainted after complaining of feeling "dizzy". 911 was called immediately and Doris quickly ran to her daughter's side. When she arrived backstage, there were already medical personnel from the audience working on Kathryn. Doris sat as close as she could to her daughter, all she could do was pray.

The paramedics arrived and after several attempts at reviving her in the ambulance, sadly, Kathryn Mary Bender passed away soon after reaching the hospital. Her mom, in absolute shock and desperation, tried to maintain strong, for she had one child at her side and the other was out and about, living her life. When this happened, Kathryn's sister, Elizabeth (23 at the time) was at the Chicago Bear's game and her brother, Nicholas (20 at the time) received a call to come to the hospital while at school rehearsing a role for an upcoming play. He arrived at the hospital as the doctors called the family into a room to tell them the news. Elizabeth arrived shortly after. As Kathryn's family was forced to deal with this unimaginable tragedy and learn to live life without her, they vowed to keep her spirit alive in every possible way.

Months later, after no cause of death was found in the autopsy, several other attempts were made to find out what exactly killed Kathryn Bender. Research determined that her death was most likely caused by long QT syndrome, a disorder of the heart's electrical system. The condition leaves its victims vulnerable to fast, chaotic heartbeats that may lead to fainting - and in some cases, cardiac arrest, and in Kathryn's case, sudden death. Kathryn may have been born with a genetic predisposition for long QT syndrome. The family will continue to have unanswered questions and since her passing, Kathryn's brother and sister have both undergone extensive testing, including partaking in studies at the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, MN. The results found that the two remaining Bender children are clear of potential harm from the disorder. However, they do believe that Kathryn's father, who died suddenly at age 39 when Kathryn was just 5 years old, may be the missing genetic link.

It has been one and a half years since Kathryn died suddenly and since then, her family, with the immense support of friends, relatives, and co-workers, established and continue to operate the Kathryn Bender Memorial Foundation (www.kbmf.net). Through this corporation, and many other inspiring efforts, Kathryn's life has touched many people in countless ways.

Some of the efforts include a Dance Outreach Program through Steps Dance Center in which proceeds will benefit local foster care organizations in Naperville. Others include the Hong Kong Youth Arts Foundation and Kathryn's Bears, where stuffed animals are donated each year to sick children at Children's Memorial Hospital. Also, Kathryn was planning to donate her hair to Locks of Love. Since she was unable to do this, several people have donated their own hair in her name. The foundation has also awarded 6 scholarships since it has been established. The foundations first fundraiser to commemorate Kathryn's life is a blue rubber bracelet that simply says, "Touch a Life with a Smile." There is also a cookbook titled Chocolate Thursdays, which includes recipes from Naperville residents. It started as a project that fellow teachers at Beebe Elementary organized when Doris was out of work after Kathryn's death.

The most recent event remembering Kathryn was the KBMF 1st Annual 5K Walk/Run which was held on July 14th. Ultimately, a major goal of the foundation is to help fund testing and research of long QT syndrome in hopes to prevent tragedies like this from occurring in other families.

To become involved in the foundation, please visit www.kbmf.net.

Another example of how Kathryn's life touched others is through the Gift of Hope Organ & Tissue Donor Network (www.giftofhope.org) that coordinates organ and tissue donation and supports families of donors in the northern three-quarters of Illinois and northwest Indiana. This organization is near and dear to the Benders. On June 12, 2007 they received a letter thanking Kathryn for the gift she gave to someone in need. At age 16, she checked YES to organ donation on her driver's license and her gift of life has indeed been received. Kathryn's tissue was donated to a Colorado resident who, ironically, is also a dancer. He was in great need after a skiing accident left him injured and once again, Kathryn's life touched someone in a special way.

As a child, Kathryn Bender attended Hobson Cooperative Nursery School where her first connections to the community began. She moved onto Naper Elementary School, Washington Junior High School, and then Naperville North. Her goal was to receive the 4.0 award for all 8 semesters of high school- a goal she would have achieved had her life not ended so soon. While growing up Kathryn played soccer, joined girl scouts, played the flute, sang in the choir, joined a church group, played the piano, became a shepherd for the Children's Liturgy at her church, St Peter and Paul Parish, and performed in musicals and plays. She loved Cookie Dough Creations and craved burritos at Chipotle, and still remained a tiny little thing. She even had a couple of crushes, according to her sister Elizabeth, but these will remain secret. Kathryn was an all American girl in every sense of the phrase. Her brother and her sister remember the little things that made her such a special part of their lives. "Kathryn was my best friend. Growing up we shared a room and she had panda bears everywhere,"



remembers Elizabeth. "She loved them and had over one hundred. When she died, we kept her collection so close to us. Then, as time went on we started to give them away to the different people whose lives were touched by Kathryn. It was something we could give them to remember her. She always wanted to go to San Diego to see a real panda, but never got a chance," Elizabeth tearfully added.

"One of my favorite memories of Kathryn was when she asked me to help her with acting out a challenging role she was given for a NNHS play, entitled Angels Fall. She had to be a mean person (something that didn't come easy for her) and so I walked her through it. I couldn't have been more proud of her when I saw her performance of that scene; she meant so much to me. We had a typical older brother/younger sister relationship- sometimes I would pick her up after school or rehearsal and we would simply say 'hey' to each other. When I drive by North or find myself missing her, I'll always still say a simple 'hey'," said Nicholas in a sad, but sweet tone.

"Kathryn's smile made everybody feel welcome," remembers her mom, as tears began to run slowly down her cheek. "The memories are the only thing that keeps you going. We all had a wonderful 17 years together and we will treasure them forever. I will always remember her as beautiful and happy. So many people were inspired by her. And, she just loved her mom- she always wanted to be by me."

One of the last things her mom wanted to share with me was that one of Kathryn's favorite songs was "I Hope you Dance." It was a song she danced to when she was in 8th grade. And after getting to know the beautiful and caring person she was through what her family has shared, something tells me that dancing is exactly what Kathryn's spirit is doing at this very moment. So delicate, among the clouds above us- and undoubtedly, in the hearts of those she has touched.

For more information on Long QT Syndrome, visit www.mayoclinic.com, or Sudden Arrhythmia Death Syndromes Foundation at www.sads.org. *Photos: (left) Kathryn is photographed on the Riverwalk for her Senior picture. (middle right) Kathryn with her mom, Nicholas and Elizabeth.*