

This Mother Knows Best

By Melanie Threlkeld McConnell

Most new parents do not sit and wait for their newborns to die. But that's what Penney Huffman thought she had to do with her daughter Julianne.

Despite two surgeries within two weeks of her birth, Julianne Prudhomme would not live long, the doctors told Huffman, because Julianne's organs were defective.

But Huffman, a senior secretary at Boise State's Canyon County campus, wanted control over her infant's supposed last days, so she brought her 9-week-old daughter home.

"If she is going to die," Huffman says she thought to herself, "then let me learn how to take care of her and give her a life as long as I can. I can learn that stuff. I wanted her to be my child for awhile, not just a hospital child."

Five years later the possibility of an early death for Julianne still haunts Huffman. It has knocked on their door more than once — a severe case of pneumonia, a potentially fatal infection and a five-organ transplant that became the subject of a national television news program.

But Huffman is not idle. She has armed herself with the knowledge, resolve and determination to fight death on her territory, on her terms, so that if it does arrive neither she nor her family will be ambushed.

"When Julianne started getting sicker we really started spending time as a family, sometimes without her, talking about the possibility of her death," Huffman says.

"We tried to present it in a manner that if she died, yes, we would be sad, we would miss her terribly, but it would be the right thing for her. It would have been what God planned for her. It would have meant no suffering for her, and at that time she was beginning to suffer physically."

For Julianne, Huffman says she tried to paint "a pretty picture about heaven for her so that if it came to that time in her life where she would be that close to death she could let go. I was trying to prepare her to let go and not hang on to us."

To hear Huffman speak about the past five years, you might think she was a doctor or a nurse. She can rattle off surgical procedures and medical terms like they were old family recipes.

She still cares for Julianne at home, keeping her free from infections, changing colostomy bags and monitoring her blood count and test results.

Huffman will not allow Julianne to spend more than a few days at

a time in the hospital. She feels Julianne heals better at home surrounded by the normal activities of any family — her dog, her teen-age sisters coming home from school, and the family eating dinner at the dining room table.

Taking control of Julianne's medical care was Huffman's way of keeping her daughter's death at bay. It was her way or the highway, she recalls, laughing.

"I felt really committed to keeping her healthy as long as possible. I knew there were things I could do to control it. There was a central venous line that if she got infected it could kill her, and medications had to be given at a certain time. We had to have the right kind of nurses.

"They had to do things the way I wanted it done or they could leave. Because by golly, it was like this is what works for her, this is what keeps her healthy."

The constancy of a child on the edge of death has brought the

family closer and taught them some important lessons, Huffman explains.

"We have received letters and letters from people who say Julianne has changed the way they feel about their lives and their crises.

"For as bad as her situation is, things have just literally come together like it was mapped out. She has done some suffering, but the suffering is far less than the happiness in her life." □



From Legos at home to stays in the hospital, mother and daughter value each day.



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