

REESE'S STORY

Usually in memorial services that I have attended, at some point someone gets up and talks about the life of the person who has died. The content is around the person's life experiences, their character, and accomplishments. But what does one say about a person who never lived outside of a hospital, who only came in physical contact with a select group of people, and who only lived in this world for 5 months? Well, if you're talking about Reese Alexandra Gray, aka, Miss Bubbles, you actually have quite a bit to say. I'm honored to be the one today to share her story with you. My comments are really a compilation of feelings and stories told to me by family members and friends who have been so deeply touched by Reese.

Reese Alexandra Gray came into, and exited this world prematurely. So we weren't exactly ready for her entrance, and we absolutely were not ready for her departure. But I believe she and God had this thing going about life. I believe she knew she needed to be born early to save her life, otherwise she probably would have died in the womb. She was definitely a fighter, and she wasn't about to let that happen. Born at 4 lbs 9 oz. (much of that being fluid), she proved that strength is not measured by weight, size, or stature. This tiny miracle of life was on a mission.

In Exodus Chapter 23, verse, 20, God said, "I am going to send an angel to guard you on the way and to bring you to the place that I have prepared for you." From the accounts of her brief life, I believe Reese's mission was to be our angel here on earth, and now in heaven. In fact, when you read the messages posted on her website and when you read emails which captured people's emotions, people who had never even met Reese, described her as our "Angel baby" and talked about her "angel eyes". Oh those eyes!

Reese's beautiful and captivating eyes told her story. She connected to you with those angel eyes in a way words could never do. One of her primary nurses, Heidi, stated that Reese actually "told her", by her eyes, what she needed Heidi to do for her. That's what I call a "take charge" little lady. Of course, that's not at all surprising if you know her Mommy, Daddy, and big brother.

In the 5 short months of life, Reese made a difference in more people's lives than many adults who have walked this earth for decades, by the way she lived that life and the lessons she taught us about how to live a joy-filled life. I call these lessons, Reese's Rules of Life.

One of the most important lessons she taught us is that miracles do happen in this day and age. We experienced miracles with Reese many times in the past few months, but the most profound miracle was when she was experiencing a life threatening GI bleed which began to spread to her mouth and little bottom. Dr. McCormick advised Tara and Jeff that if they didn't try to find the source of the

bleeding so it could be treated, she would most probably die. But no decision was easy. To perform the procedure, she would have to be transported to Children's downtown for the endoscopy. Tara and Jeff were told that if the transport to the hospital didn't kill her, the procedure itself probably would. As with many times, Jeff and Tara put their faith in God, made the tough decision, and consented to the transport.

The procedure took a couple of hours, probably the longest two hours Tara and Jeff had ever spent. When Dr. McCormick came out, she had a look of bewilderment and shrugged her shoulders. When they went in for the endoscopy, they realized the hemorrhaging had stopped, and they could find no source of the bleeding. Coincidence? I think not. Not only that, when the mobile transport brought her back to North Austin Medical Center, she only needed 1 pump of meds compared to the 5 pumps required to keep her alive on the trip up.

When Jeff and Tara returned to Reese's home at the NICU in North Austin, there was a tremendous celebration with the awesome medical team who had thought they might never see Miss Bubbles again.

Now if you're wondering how she got this name, you need only to look at the precious picture on the front of the scrap book that Tara made for Reese. I hope you have a chance to go through this, as it really captures Reese's unique personality. Apparently Reese was a very skilled bubble blower. This was obviously one of the many joys she got out of life.

Despite all the tubes, pokes, and prodding's she lived with each day, she found something to enjoy in her surroundings. Her Gammy B, my sister, Barbara, told me that even though she probably never knew what it really felt like to feel good, she found joy in the simple things of life, and you could definitely tell when she was happy. She smiled when she saw her Mommy and Daddy, she smiled at her favorite mobile with its simple lights and the sound of birds. And one thing for sure, Reese was into music. Not a surprise, when you consider her genes. In fact, the music you heard as we were assembling was a compilation of her favorite music. Reese was definitely an Enya fan. Her stats would even go up when she heard it. She taught us that no matter what we're going through, there's always something to be thankful for and take pleasure in.

Another special quality in Reese is that she brought out the very best in the people who were with her and she caused us to live our lives a little better, a little more like God intended. Certainly Jeff and Tara would tell you that her strength inspired them to endure the challenges of the last few months. They have also felt the strength that comes from a community of believers who hold you up in prayer and enable you to endure the unimaginable.

Many of us have put our own problems in perspective just by looking at what this family has so courageously endured, and our own will to fight the good fight has been strengthened by Reese's unbelievable will to live. We have been more appreciative of our own healthy children and are reminded that our children are loaned to us for a reason. We are in awe of the miracle of a healthy, perfect baby. On the other hand, Reese taught us that even the imperfect, can be beautiful and perfect in its own way. And, finally, Reese got us all talking to God on a more regular basis. In fact, her great Nanny, my mom, told me she just made you feel closer to God.

When you look at the wonderful team of medical professionals that cared for Reese and became Tara and Jeff's extended family, it is obvious they all went above and beyond the call of duty. Heidi, Reese's primary nurse, after only 8 months in the NICU, made nurse of the year after spending 2 months with Reese. She feels Reese played a part in that recognition and made her a better nurse. It is also obvious the medical team, itself became attached to Tara, Jeff, Hunter and Reese. How could they not?

When Reese moved into her private room, the nurses took pictures of those special moments in Reese's day and encouraged Tara and Jeff to bring pictures and mementos from home. Reese's room was one of the most decorated rooms in the entire hospital. That room became her home, and over the course of 5 months, the nurses and doctors became family to the Gray's.

In particular, Jeff and Tara wanted me to relay how blessed they were to have the doctors and nurses in the NICU at North Austin to partner with them in their care for Reese. This is a very special team of dedicated, kind, gentle and caring professionals. And they were tenacious about finding out how best to treat Reese. They never stopped researching and were always open to trying new approaches if they thought it would help, even if those ideas came from Tara or Jeff and not out of some medical journal. There are no words to express the appreciation Tara and Jeff feel for those of you at North Austin Medical Center.

As it turns out, the day before Reese died, Heidi played a key role in making that a day Jeff and Tara will always treasure. This was a Saturday morning when normally Jeff would go up to stay with Reese, but for some reason he felt compelled to stay with Hunter. Tara, on the other hand, felt compelled to see Reese.

So Tara, went up to the hospital to spend time with her. It was a good day. Reese had taken her first bath in a tub. She was calm, clean, and wide awake. In fact, she never slept that day. Tara held her under Reese's arms with Reese facing her, and for the first time, Reese's little feet pushed against Tara's knees as she held her; almost poised to bounce. Tara and Jeff had learned to cherish each new achievement from their angel baby.

Heidi asked Tara what Jeff was doing. She knew it was a good day that needed to be experienced by both Mommy and Daddy, so she text messaged Jeff to say, "Your little girl wants to see you." Tara went home so that Jeff could make it to the hospital before the change in the nurses' shift.

When she got home, Jeff was still hanging out with Hunter and was planning to shower before he went to see Reese. For some reason, Tara was filled with a sense of urgency and told Jeff he didn't have time. He needed to go now. Since he's a wise, married man, he left immediately.

When he arrived at the hospital, he was greeted by his very wide awake daughter. Daddy and his little girl spent 25 wonderful minutes where they gazed lovingly into each others eyes. Reese went to sleep, and the next day she died.

Neither Heidi, nor Tara, nor Jeff knew that Saturday would be Reese's last good day. In fact, another lesson Reese has taught us is never to assume tomorrow. Live in the present moment and enjoy today. Of course, it makes you wonder if Reese knew that she would be joined with her father in heaven the next day. Again, I think she and God had this special thing going from the beginning. He sent her to us to make a difference in our lives, and while her earthly body is gone, I believe He holds her heavenly body in the palm of His hand. Reese has been healed. She know longer has any tubes in her body, but her angel eyes continue to smile on us. And she will always be us.

In fact, the day after she died, Tara and Jeff believe she was reminding them of this in her own special way. They were with my sister Barbara and were on their way to go back to the hospital to take down all of Reese's things from her room. They had just been at Target to buy some storage bins. As they were stopped at a stop light, it dawned on Tara that normally she would be so excited to go to the hospital as it meant that she would get to see her little girl. She began to cry. My sister told her that your baby girl will always be with you. In fact she's with you now. At that moment, Jeff looked at the car in front of them. At the back of the car was a trailer hitch which had a sticker stenciled with the word "Reese". Coincidence? I think not.

So while we are left with beautiful memories and Reese's Rules of Life to guide us on our journeys, there is no doubt that we still are filled with sorrow and questions of our God as to why He wouldn't heal her our way and grant us that particular miracle.

I found a story which is meant to explain death to young children, but probably all of us could use some help in explaining this event which none of us will escape.

I'd like to close with this story. It's called, "Water Bugs & Dragonflies"....

