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My two kids were introduced to Young Life in middle school. Your entire organization reflects excellence. I know there's a lot of volunteer support for Young Life and I see how hard your people work. - Art, Virginia

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Miracle on the Mountain

By Correll Seidel**Relationships Magazine - Winter 2008**

We were a typical American family — mother, father, son Shawn, 19 years old, and daughter Kaitlin, 16 years old — until the summer of 2006 when life, as we knew it, would never be the same.

As planned, Kaitlin attended Young Life camp at Frontier Ranch in June 2006, just as her brother, Shawn, had the summer after his sophomore year of high school. While at camp Kaitlin called home every day (as instructed by her mother) to talk about her day. I specifically remember her call after the mountain climb. She said it was the hardest thing she had ever done, and that she was in the last group up. Being a sympathetic mother I said, "Oh, Kaitlin, it couldn't have been that hard. You are in great physical shape!"

When Kaitlin returned from camp she stepped off the bus with a glow around her. She had always been a happy person, but now she seemed to radiate joy. We got the best hug ever. I can still feel it. From the bus we had to drive immediately to Wal-Mart to develop the 300 pictures she took at camp. The following weeks I noticed her studying her Bible and attending meetings with Catherine Jennison, her Young Life leader. It seemed as though she was cramming in all the life she could, doing everything she had ever wanted to do. On Saturday, she and her friends went to the lake. Although I expected them to be tired when they returned, all the girls ran in and showered at our house and quickly left for a sleepover at Catherine's apartment.

The next day, Sunday, July 30, Kaitlin died suddenly of an undiagnosed heart ailment. In the days that followed, we learned she had committed her life to Christ at camp. That must have been the glow we had noticed.

Months later, when we celebrated Kaitlin's life on what would have been her 17th birthday, her Young Life leaders invited us to experience Frontier as Kaitlin had done. We knew it would be hard but healing. So in June 2007 Rob and I headed to Frontier Ranch as adult guests. We wanted to go exactly where Kaitlin had gone and do what she had done to reenact all the pictures she took.

It was a challenge. Within the first 24 hours we repelled — no, first we climbed up the mountain to repel down! On the second day we rode horses. Or at least I rode until my horse threw me! I thought, "This is going to be a long week."

Thursday was "mountain climb" day. We hiked from the buses to the rest stop, and I was the absolute last person to make it to the rest stop. Once there, my husband saw how high the climb was and decided he could not make it. Two adult guests, a married leader couple and a camper also stayed at the rest stop as the kids continued to climb. My eyes welled with tears. If Kaitlin could climb the mountain with three-quarters of a heart, I could climb it with a broken heart. So our adult host accompanied me as I continued to try and climb the 14,000-foot mountain.

Of the adults who stayed behind, my husband, Rob, sat under a tree alone, heartbroken and disappointed, while the two women visited with the leader couple. He could overhear their conversation and heard the couple say they had lost their 16-year-old son, Shawn, to leukemia four years earlier. With that, he was drawn to the couple and the three of them embraced.

As the couple and Rob shared how they cope with the loss of a child, they discovered a common bond. The mother said, "On Shawn's birthday we release balloons." Surprised, Rob explained how, on what would have been Kaitlin's 17th birthday, her entire softball team went out to their positions and each released a balloon. Both teams and everyone at the softball game watched in silence as the balloons rose high into the sky.

No sooner had the words left his mouth than a balloon appeared! On a Colorado mountain at 9,000 feet in the middle of nowhere, a balloon descended down the mountainside until its ribbon got stuck in a tree not far from the group. The leader retrieved the balloon



and handed it to my husband. The balloon was purple, Kaitlin's favorite color and the color of the bracelets we wear in remembrance of her. On the purple balloon were the words "Happy Birthday."

As the kids started to come back down the mountain, Rob waited anxiously for me to return. He had hidden the balloon in his backpack so not to detract from my accomplishment. I did make it to the top of the mountain! I had my picture taken wearing Kaitlin's T-shirt and hat — just as she had done. Upon my return I was embraced by my very emotional husband. All the while I thought, "I am the one who just climbed the mountain — why are you crying?!" As we rode the bus back to camp, he opened the backpack to get me a sandwich. Seeing the purple helium balloon inside, I asked the obvious question. He told me the whole story when we were alone later that night.

Saturday was the last day of camp. While several of the adults shopped in the camp store, our area director, Brian Summerall, visited with Rob as they rocked in the rocking chairs out on the porch. When we were through shopping, the group of us went to the soda shop to get a drink. Our area director and my husband slid into a booth while we went to get drinks. As we returned to the booth my husband was excitedly rocking back and forth grinning. Before we even sat down he said, "I have something exciting to tell all of you! I committed my life to Christ!"

Catherine Jennison said it was just as Kaitlin had done. She and her friends were sitting in a circle on the floor during cabin time. Kaitlin sat cross-legged hugging her pillow, rocking back and forth grinning, and said the exact same phrase: "I committed my life to Christ." What had Brian said in 45 minutes that my husband had not heard in his 55 years?!

That night at the Say-So, the microphone had gone through half the room when it reached the back row where the adults sat. Rob took the microphone and through his tears he publicly professed his faith commitment. The room erupted! Everyone stood, turned around and applauded. There was a standing ovation for several minutes.

I wondered then, as I do even now, was the Happy Birthday balloon a reminder to us of Kaitlin's birthday or was it Kaitlin's way of telling her daddy, "Welcome to the birth of your new life with Christ."

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