

Survivors



Wes and Colin Charlton

by Cindy Charlton

As my 8-year-old slid into the back seat of my car, I carefully glanced in the rearview mirror to get a peek at his face, not wanting to be caught trying to get an idea of his mood. Wes had just left his therapist's office after an hour of grief counseling. He had lived through some pretty hard times in his young life, and the effects had been taking a toll on him.

Wes was only 4 years old when I contracted a rare form of Strep A bacteria, called necrotizing fasciitis, or what is commonly termed "the flesh-eating bacteria." As a result of contracting this life-threatening illness, I lost the lower parts of both legs and feet, and my right hand. I was in the hospital for 3 months and in rehabilitation for 9 weeks. Half of Wes's fourth year was spent with me in the hospital. Now, while he was still trying to cope with his feelings surrounding my illness, and subsequent disability, he was faced with his dad's newly diagnosed cancer.

My husband, Michael, was diagnosed with terminal cancer 2 years after my illness rocked our little family. Wes was trying to make sense of it all in his 8-year-old brain. His heart had already been beaten and bruised by almost losing me permanently, and now having to deal with a very ill father was almost more than he could bear. Grief counseling seemed like a much-needed part in his troubled life.

As I looked at his face in the mirror, I could see that he didn't seem as "rough" as he sometimes did after emerging from his therapist's office.

"Wes," I began.

He looked up at me. "Yeah?"

"When we get home, I need you to go over to Johnny's house and get Colin." Colin was Wes's 4-year-old brother. He was playing at a neighborhood friend's house, while Wes and I were at his appointment.

"Why do I have to do everything?" came his mumbled, whiny reply from the back seat.

I took a deep breath and gathered my thoughts before I spoke.

"Wes, I know that dad and I expect a lot from you sometimes, and I'm really sorry, but here's the deal. Your dad is sick and in bed, and I can't get up the steps at Johnny's house to ring the doorbell."

I went on to explain that we were a family, and that families are a team. "When one of the team members can't do something, the other members come in to help out," I said. "That's what families are all about."

For the first time since my illness, my son began to speak to me about how he felt when I was in the hospital.

"I'm so angry that those doctors took your legs!" Wes said.

"I know, honey," I said, trying to soothe the pain, "but they had to, to save my life."

"I was sick too, when you were in the hospital," he replied.

"You were?" I asked.

"Yeah," he began in a small, shaking voice, "my head hurt, and my stomach hurt, and my heart hurt."

Fighting back my tears, I replied, "But look at us now, Wes! We're here, and



Dad and the boys

we are strong! You are the strongest and most courageous kid I know." I glanced again in the rearview mirror, needing to see if my words had connected with his heart. I noticed a small transformation taking place in my back seat. Wes was sitting up straighter, and a smile was beginning at the corners of his mouth.

"Yeah, I am strong, aren't I, Mom!"

"Yes you are, Wes, and that's what being a survivor is all about," I told him. "And, you and I, Wes, we are survivors!"

As we pulled into the driveway, Wes unbuckled his seat belt and loped across two lawns on his way to retrieve his brother. I sat for a moment in the front seat of my car, amazed at the healing that had just taken place in the confines of my car. Both of my boys emerged from Johnny's front door, in a dead heat, racing for our house. Two beaming little faces lifted my spirits and warmed my heart. I shook my head slightly, got out of the car smiling, and walked to my front door.

Photos courtesy of Cindy Charlton