

Angels Among Us

Life has a way of giving each of us a full measure. Many things that we experience are frequently beyond an understanding of the how or why. Our family has been touched by a group of nine Nashville, Tennessee residents who were complete strangers to us. We do not know the how or why of what they did; just that they did. While their acts of grace and love occurred in August of 2011, I remember it as if this occurred yesterday. I think the ability to vividly recall something in this detail this much later is probably normal when the “it” involves the potential death of your child. Before I share this incredible story of these Nashville heroes, I want to provide you with some history and context about our journey.

We live in Little Rock, Arkansas. I met my wife, Billie, when she was a 16 year old high school senior. I was two years older and entering my sophomore year at the University of Arkansas in Fayetteville. Upon graduation, Billie followed me to Fayetteville and we quickly blossomed into a committed relationship. We were deeply in love and were married 5 months after she graduated from nursing school. We both landed work in careers we enjoyed settling in Little Rock, which to us seemed to be a big and vibrant city having both grown up in the much smaller community of Hot Springs, Arkansas. Having both been reared in broken homes with alcohol abuse, we badly wanted to reverse that cycle as we moved into a small home in west Little Rock and planned on starting a family within a couple of years. Billie had also been adopted, and while so grateful for her mom who adopted her, she very much wanted to have children of her own. In anticipation of becoming pregnant, Billie moved into a part time position when one became available as there was not much job sharing or flex schedules available at that time. With her part time position secured, we decided it was time to start our family. Several weeks later, I came in from working in the yard when Billie gave me a small gift wrapped package that contained a pair of yellow booties. We were elated and our first child, Lauren, was born in October of 1987. She was the joy of our world and would soon be followed by our precious Ashley 19 months later. Our lives were simple and full of joy as two young parents who longed for normalcy in family had been blessed with two healthy and loving daughters. Billie transitioned out of work and a few years later our son Jared was born, completing our family. The girls were great friends and they both doted on Jared dressing him up in their baby doll clothes, having him serve as a prop in family plays and constantly loving on him as they met his every need. We were blessed and for a season had few significant worries. When the time for school started, we selected Pulaski Academy which was a wonderful private school in west Little Rock close to our home. All three of the kids easily adjusted to school and life progressed smoothly until Lauren was 10 years old.

While at recess one day, two little girls Lauren was sitting with started taking about weight, and while both of these girls were much shorter than Lauren and weighed significantly less than she did, their conversation turned to the need not to be fat. This resonated with Lauren and she somehow internalized that she was fat and for her to fit in and be popular she needed to

lose about 20 pounds. She was 5 feet tall and weighed 89 pounds at the time, but this confusing message from her playmates placed a stake inside her that would come to consume Lauren's and our family's lives for the next 15 years. These other two girls were barely over 4 feet tall and while Lauren was almost a full foot taller, she somehow correlated being at their weight as what was necessary to be accepted and liked. The ironic thing about the mind is that Lauren was already all that she longed to be; she just did not see or feel it. She was considered by so many families in her class as the child that they wanted their children to play with and be like. Lauren just did not see or believe this as the beginning of a long journey with anorexia nervosa and distorted thinking had firmly taken root in her mind, completely unbeknownst to Billie and me. She was in 5th grade. Over the next few months, Billie and I started noticing changes in Lauren's behaviors. This was before kids had constant access to the internet and Lauren started reading the labels of food and deciding what she wanted to eat based solely upon fat and caloric content. It was also at this time that we started catching her "exercising" in her room or going for an "extra run" at night to "get in better shape for soccer or basketball". She started losing weight, which was accompanied by hair loss, constant dark circles around her eyes and frigidly cold extremities. Frequent and regular trips to the doctor's office ensued, with the suggestion that Lauren's physical activities needed to be curtailed and that we needed to see a "specialist" who dealt with children who had an "eating disorder". While I remember Karen Carpenter dying of complications from an eating disorder in the early 80s, this was the first time I had personally dealt with what would come to be a label affixed to Lauren and a battle that would consume our family for the next 15 years. Billie was in disbelief and insisted that we send Lauren's medical records to the Mayo Clinic to be reviewed by some of the best doctors in the world and that we search for Billie's biological mom in hopes of finding medical history that would shed light on some other problem that had to be present. While both of those efforts were completed, neither revealed anything other than the original diagnosis of two words I would grow to hate, "anorexia nervosa".

Later in the year and early into the next year, Lauren was admitted to the first of what would be fifteen hospitalizations over a 15 year period of time. This first hospitalization we hoped would be a wake-up call to snap her out of her eating disorder, but Lauren quickly learned to manage expectations enough to just get out. We started weekly individual, nutritional, family and couples therapy in an effort to do whatever her treatment team told us we needed to do to help Lauren get better. It did not "fix" her as we had desperately hoped it would. We would come to learn that "fix" is a relative concept with the diagnosis and treatment of an eating disorder. In her 7th grade year, Lauren had become immersed in the illness and we were advised to admit her into an adolescent in-patient treatment program in Arizona. This would become the first of four separate inpatient stays over the next 12 years, with each admission ranging from 3 to 11 months of treatment. To add more complication and stress to an already challenging situation, our insurance did not cover any of these in-patient treatment facilities and we were not from wealthy backgrounds where we could draw on family resources to help us. This type of treatment was very expensive, ranging from \$900 to \$1,200 per day, and had to be paid in

advance of services being rendered. Our family's ability to meet these expenses has been nothing short of miraculous and confirms for me what many of us realize "after the fact" that God's grace is sufficient, and while God's timing may not be early, He is never late. It is one thing to know and understand this intellectually; it is much more difficult to live in a place of this much trust when your child is on the death's doorstep. We have experienced three instances where Lauren was facing death. My heart aches for families who have lost a child as there are no words to adequately explain the pain associated with such profound loss. What is also lost for those on the outside looking in is the impact that a chronic illness such as anorexia nervosa has on the entire family, particularly younger siblings who miss nothing regarding what is going on in the family and who feel lost in the shuffle and helpless to make things better. While we all tend to focus on the crisis which friends and loved ones experience, this journey has taught me to be much more sensitive to family impact that hard circumstances present. Our other children have taught me a lot about grace, commitment and love through this very hard journey.

Fast forward 5 years to the fall of 2006 where Lauren started her freshman year of college at the University of Texas in Austin. About 6 weeks into her first semester, I received a phone call at work from a number I did not recognize on my caller id. It was an eating disorder doctor from Austin informing me that Lauren had been admitted to the emergency room with her heart rate in the 40's and without immediate medical intervention, Lauren's would die. Panic-stricken, and praying for Lauren's life, we immediately drove to Austin. Lauren was freezing as her body temperature was below 93 degrees and the treatment team in Austin recommended that we immediately fly her to a hospital in St. Louis that specialized in treating adolescents with eating disorders. After a month in the hospital in St. Louis, Lauren transitioned to her third inpatient eating disorder treatment facility, which we would later learn was a horrific experience in her recovery. Lauren spent four months inpatient in this facility before her release, and while she was in a better weight range and looked better to us on the outside, Lauren would later share that her experience at this facility adversely impacted her desire for recovery. Upon discharge, Lauren quickly fell back into her familiar patterns and continued to struggle with self-esteem, confidence and maintaining her weight throughout the rest of her undergraduate years, actually having to complete some of her undergraduate work in Little Rock when her health was so compromised. While Lauren managed to obtain her degree in 4 years, she did not have a normal college experience because of the constant presence of the eating disorder in her life. Upon graduation and after working as news producer for KARK, the NBC affiliate in Little Rock, Lauren decided to apply to graduate school and was accepted to the occupational therapy program at Belmont University in Nashville, Tennessee.

As Lauren was not in a healthy place when she was admitted to Belmont, her treatment team advised us not to financially support Lauren as her team felt that this may be the catalyst that would result in Lauren assuming responsibility for her health. While I never saw this coming, Lauren applied for and obtained student loans to completely fund her graduate education. I was shocked as this was a significant amount of debt. While we did not support this

decision based upon Lauren's health, this was the kind of independence that her treatment team had encouraged us would be necessary for Lauren to exercise to have a chance to recover from her eating disorder. Lauren did not look healthy when she moved to Nashville and our hearts ached as we left her apartment. We constantly prayed for God to save her as we felt helpless. Lauren was in about the same condition she was in when she enrolled at the University of Texas in 2006 and that left us so worried and fearful. We were being advised by Lauren's treatment team that Lauren had to "own this" and to let her go. Lauren somehow made it through her first year in Belmont's OT program, but her health remained extremely poor –skeletal frame, thinning hair, cold to the touch, dark circles under her eyes and yellowed skin. We went to visit her in July of 2011 before the start of her second year and she was not in a safe place as her health was compromised. She was a 23 year old young adult who was extremely sick and would not accept any input, advice or direction from us regarding her health. As we left Nashville the last weekend of July in 2011, we were in tears and praying for God to save her as we knew we had done all that we knew to do, which had not been enough.

On August 23, 2011, I was in my office in Little Rock when I received a call from a Nashville 615 area code that I did not recognize on my caller ID. My heart leapt as receiving unknown phone calls from cities where Lauren has lived over the past 6 years had proven to be filled with gut wrenching news. As I lifted the receiver to accept the call, I prayed that Lauren was ok as I tentatively said "hello". I was totally unprepared for what happened next and was terrified as I heard two women who identified themselves as "Louise" and "Susie", people I did not know, immediately ask "*are you the father of Lauren Lax?*" My mind raced quickly as my quivering voice cried out "*is she ok?*" not even bothering to answer their question. Louise was doing most of the talking, and she told me that no she did not think Lauren was ok, and that she, Susie and a group of other concerned people from the Nashville Green Hills YMCA were planning an intervention to take Lauren to Vanderbilt Hospital as they were fearful for her life. Words do not adequately express the worried tone in their voices or the resolve of their call. They were not asking me for permission nor were they asking me for my blessing, but rather they were telling me that they feared for my daughter's life and that they were taking her to the hospital in the morning. My head was spinning as I knew from our recent visit and from the concern in these two women's voices that Lauren was really in grave condition. I asked them if I could conference Billie into the call, and while I do not know this, as I dialed to connect Billie I sensed that Louise and Susie may have also thought that we were terrible, neglectful parents who allowed our daughter to live in such an emaciated condition. As I gathered myself a bit and got Billie on the call, Louise and Susie explained to us that they were members of the Green Hills YMCA in Nashville where Lauren was working out daily, often 6 to 7 hours a day. They had observed her behaviors and began talking among themselves about "that girl" and their concern for her well-being. None of them knew who Lauren was and none of them had particularly close bonds with one another prior to their involvement in Lauren's life. These were just total strangers who were observing a young woman starving and exercising herself to death before their very eyes. We shared part of Lauren's story with Louise and Susie who became more

emboldened to proceed with their plan. Louise and Susie told us that once they got Lauren to the Vanderbilt hospital, they would call to inform us of Lauren's condition. These women were not calling to see if we supported this; they felt called to intervene to try to save Lauren's life and they were simply sharing what they were going to do. When we hung up, I cried thinking that maybe, just maybe, this was the answer to years of prayers.

I immediately called Billie back, who had just returned two days earlier from taking our son to start his freshman year of college and was emotionally drained. At this point in our lives, we had been through hundreds of hours of therapy sessions and an issue that was front and center for us is whether we should go to Nashville to rescue Lauren or to let her navigate this on her own as we had swooped in to rescue her many times before. For anyone reading this who may instantly think that they know what they would do in this situation, I have learned through 15 years of dealing with the impact of a chronically severe eating disorder is that there are few bright lines and no room for judgment of others. Eating disorders are maddeningly complex illness, where ultimately how someone afflicted with an eating disorder views themselves, the coping skills they develop and their ultimate desire to get better are the critical factors determining outcome. Just two years earlier a young woman Lauren had met and befriended in an inpatient treatment facility collapsed in her home with a heart attack and died. She was 21. Anorexia nervosa is extremely dangerous. On the *Something's Fishy* pro-treatment eating disorder website, there is a Memorial page dedicated to hundreds of young women who have died from complications related to their eating disorder. All of these realities flashed through our minds as we were trying to deal with the rush of information we had received from these Nashville strangers who sounded like they were planning to kidnap Lauren and take her against her will, if necessary, to get medical treatment in Nashville. Billie and I packed our bags that night planning to leave for Nashville at 5:00 am the next day.

Louise Grant, Susie Bateman, L'Tanya Bell, Andy Clough, Bob Johnson, Judith Hill, Fields Stringfellow and Johnny Phipps devised their plan and executed it in commando fashion. Frank Grant was also an instrumental part of this group, but he was out of town on business the day of the intervention. The Green Hills YMCA opened at 5 am and they knew that Lauren would arrive early as she was typically one of the first patrons to arrive for the first of her three 2 to 2 ½ hour workouts each day. These strangers, who did not know each other well, coordinated meeting in the YMCA parking lot at 4:30 am and worked through the contingencies of how to respond if Lauren objected, tried to bolt or if they placed her in a car and she tried to jump out. They devised a plan to approach Lauren once she was out of her car as they did not want her to sense what they were doing and drive off. When Lauren's car pulled into her regular parking spot at 4:45 am, these eight Nashville YMCA members launched into action. They approached Lauren who was puzzled by so many people approaching her at that hour in the morning. While Lauren recognized some of the people in the group, she had no relationship with any of them, having only casually seen them at the YMCA on her way to her next machine or stair master. I later learned that Louise and Susie did most of the talking and deftly handled Lauren's objections

about going to the hospital. A characteristic associated with eating disorders is that the illness is predicated upon lies. Lauren had gotten really good at not only telling, but also believing, the many lies that shrouded her life. While Lauren tried to convince the Nashville Y members that she was fine and was getting help, the group would not be deterred. Notwithstanding all the walls and barriers that Lauren had erected through all the years of battling this illness with heightened sensory perceptions to avoid help or treatment from any quarter, Lauren got in the car with these Nashville strangers and went to Vanderbilt hospital. There were four Nashville YMCA members in the car with Lauren, with two sitting on either side of her in the back to prevent her from jumping from a moving car or bolting at a stoplight, and four others coming in vehicles behind them. Louise and Susie had communicated with Vanderbilt in advance to let them know they were bringing someone in, perhaps unwillingly, with an extremely impaired health status. When they arrived at Vanderbilt, someone in the group took a picture which is worth a thousand words showing how sick Lauren really was.

Billie and I were en route to Nashville when we received an early morning call from Louise. Lauren had been taken to Vanderbilt, and incredulously, the attending resident did not feel Lauren's health status warranted her being admitted without her consent. Louise was mortified as Lauren was so obviously impaired and this resident had none of the medical background or history, yet notwithstanding low numbers all across the board, he wanted to discharge Lauren. Our Nashville group was just getting started. Louise pulled the resident aside, gave him what little history she had about Lauren and persuaded him to hold her against her wishes until we arrived. When we arrived, Lauren and Louise were waiting for us in the emergency room and Lauren was admitted based upon a more careful review of her numbers. While Vanderbilt has a strong adolescent eating disorder program, they were not equipped for adults so she was discharged a couple of days later and we were referred to Dr. Tom Scales, a specialist in Nashville, who upon examining Lauren told us that we needed to go to the hospital immediately as there was a significant chance that Lauren would die that day. Billie and I were again panic stricken, yet Lauren, who was legally an adult, was so sick that she did not think she needed help. It was a very tense and difficult next several minutes with me threatening Lauren that I would do whatever was necessary to get an emergency legal guardian appointed in a Nashville court to have her admitted to the hospital against her will, when she capitulated and reluctantly agreed to go. Upon admittance to Baptist Memorial Hospital, the admitting team was also extremely concerned about Lauren's fragile health and immediately started monitoring her heart rate. At about 11 pm that night, Lauren's heart rate dipped to an even more dangerously low level and she was transferred into the CCU intensive care unit. I remember watching the heart monitor to see if it was going to dip below 30 as that is when the cardiologist, Dr. Andrew Sager, told us he would have to take her to surgery to try to install a pace maker to save her life. I remember Dr. Sager staying at the hospital all night even though he was not on call as he felt Lauren was in that much danger. Lauren's CCU room was right outside the nurses' station, and she was being cared for by two incredibly kind, Godly and loving CCU nurses, Melissa Gilkes and Lisa Cejka, who constantly provide hope, encouragement and love to Billie and me. It was the longest night of my life as Lauren's heart rate hovered just above 30 until about 6 am the next day when her heart moved up to 33 to 34, still dangerously low, but above the level where surgery was going to be required. Lauren was in CCU for 3 days and then was moved to the cardiac care floor for 3 ½ more weeks. In this era of insurance companies

wanting to discharge patients as quickly as they can, Dr. Scales held his ground insisting that Lauren remain hospitalized on the cardiac floor until it was safe for her to travel to another inpatient treatment facility. Billie and I were staying in the hospital room with Lauren, when the group from the Nashville YMCA started coming to visit, bringing meals and showering us with love. We were total strangers to these incredible people, yet they were treating us like family, all without expectation, judgment or anything in return.

Lauren ended up leaving Baptist Memorial and transitioned to a treatment program in Miami for 11 months. Throughout this entire journey this Nashville YMCA group stayed in touch with Lauren and our family, and Frank Grant actually visited Lauren in Miami while he was in the area on business. When Lauren returned to Belmont University for her second year of her OT program, Frank and Louise hosted a wonderful reunion in their home. The pictures from this event show an incredible turnaround in Lauren's health. When I step back away from all of this, it is truly remarkable what a group of strangers, some of whom were really strangers to one other, did for our daughter and our family. They leaned in when so many people had just stared at Lauren's fragile, emaciated condition and walked on by, which is completely understandable as taking this on was so complicated, but there was just something different about this group of YMCA goers. They decided to take a chance to lead with their heart, to take great risk to invest into the life of someone that they did not know who was hurting and could not help herself and to pursue a young woman with love and without judgment. There was no abandonment of friendship, no feelings of disdain or penetrating, gawking stares and no exhibiting of a "why doesn't she just eat" attitude that Lauren had experienced great pain from in the past; these Nashville folks just gave unbridled, unconditional, unlimited love to someone who was alone, who was hurting and who was someone else's daughter, sister and friend. They did this for no personal gain or recognition. They did this because somewhere deep inside them they were called to get outside of themselves to do something truly not of this world for another. In my view, they are our Nashville Angels and they were our answer to years of prayer for God to save Lauren. He did this by sending in His Nashville Angels. Our lives will never be the same.

Today Lauren is in her third and final year of her Occupational Therapy program at Belmont University, completing her fieldwork in Austin, Texas. She will graduate in May, 2014 where a celebration in Nashville will be held with our Nashville Angles, family and friends. Her life's goal is to use her OT degree to help empower and encourage women and girls. Our family is healing, much of which we owe to the courageous acts of our Nashville Angles as they were the catalyst for and agents of change that our family had been praying for. While certainly not front and center in this story, I am particularly proud of our children Ashley and Jared who have sacrificed so much, stayed in the fight, been so supportive and taught me much about love. Our family has been so blessed by so many.