

# CLOSE TO HER HEART

Former East student Maddie Cardell grieves parents' passing

written by Chris Heady | photos courtesy of the Cardell family

They weren't supposed to take her to hospice until she said so. Mom's orders. May 17 was the day those orders were finally carried out.

"She woke up [that day] and told my dad, 'It's time,'" Kansas City Christian junior Maddie Cardell said.

The day was spent sitting in a room in Hospice care, Maddie's mom Connie not able to speak due to the profuse amount of medications she was on, Maddie distracting herself by playing on her sister's iPad.

At around 8:10 p.m., Maddie and her two older sisters, Kellie, 25, and Krista, 27, began to think their mother would last through the night. But just as they were making plans to go home and get clothes for the morning, the doctor checked Connie's pulse. They wouldn't be going anywhere.

"It won't be long from now," he said.

The Leukemia had made Connie's immune system weak and it was becoming more difficult for her to breathe. So, the rest of the Cardell family, Maddie, Kellie, Krista and their father Ken, gathered hand in hand around their sick mother and prayed. Soon after, Connie's Leukemia-induced pneumonia won its five-month battle, and she passed away.

"The way we say it was that we ushered her into heaven," Maddie said.

As Maddie cried and embraced her family over their loss, she wasn't able to realize how lucky she had actually just been. She was able to spend her mother's last moments by her side: something she wouldn't have a chance to do six months and two days later—with her father.

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She had to wash her hands. She had to take a shower before hugs. She had to wash her hands again. The routine of cleanliness was a must for Maddie growing up. After Connie's first diagnosis with Leukemia when Maddie was in third grade, life became full of hospital visits, an emphasis on sanitation and canceled play dates because a sibling of a friend might be sick.

"Most of my memories of my mom are of when she was sick or in the hospital so that was always tough," Maddie said. "I didn't know much different, so I haven't really known anything else but that."

Connie's Leukemia came and went. She beat it during Maddie's fourth grade year, but was haunted by it again in sixth. She conquered it when Maddie was in seventh grade, but was forced to battle it again during eighth grade.

Life with a mom fighting cancer was something Maddie was forced to adapt to, and it became increasingly more difficult to live with. She often had to explain to friends why they couldn't come over or what exactly was happening to her mom. Constant reminders of her situation.

"It was definitely hard to [stay positive]," Maddie said. "I was definitely sadder in those times than regular. And I'm a pretty happy person so it was kinda weird to me to be upset all the time."

But Connie's cancer and frequent hos-

pital stays didn't diminish the relationship between her and her daughter Maddie. They still tried to keep everything as "normal" as they possibly could. If Connie wasn't feeling well and couldn't go out to lunch, they'd eat lunch at the hospital. And nothing stopped them from watching Gilmore Girls together.

"We still did everything together," Maddie said. "We'd go shopping, all those girl things, it was still normal, it was just when she was in the hospital we would just do those things there."

If anything, the bond between them became stronger after Connie's diagnosis.

"We didn't know how much time she had when she first got sick so she made a point to tell [us daughters] we're not gonna fight about dumb things, we're not gonna go to bed angry, we're just gonna love each other," Maddie said. "I remember her telling me 'you're gonna be happy, you're gonna be fun, and we're gonna have a good relationship instead of fighting with each other and just love each other.'"

When away from her mom, Maddie's relationship with her father became something she treasured, too. They'd watch cartoons she treasured, too. They'd eat hospital cafeteria food together when visiting Connie. He'd push her on the swings. Their bond became something more than an average father-daughter relationship.

"We needed to be [close]," Maddie said. "Because if we weren't—life is tough enough with everything going on."

On the night of Nov. 18 Maddie's friends called her to hang out, but something inside Maddie said she'd rather hang out with her father that night. So she told her friends no and spent the evening with Ken, just them two.

Ken and Maddie made dinner together and hung around the house all night, perusing the T.V. and spending quality time together. Maddie still can't explain what inside her told her to stay in that night, but she knows she's glad she did.

This was the last time they would ever get an opportunity like this.

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Maddie wasn't in the mood for yard work on Nov. 19. Ken begged her to join him and his friend from across the street, but Maddie just wasn't in the mood for getting her hands dirty.

She had other plans—going to see her friend Brad Tippin's soccer game. So she said goodbye to her dad, got in her green Toyota Avalon and drove off.

She began to receive phone calls from family throughout the game, but didn't think much of it. If anything, she thought it was news that Krista had finally gotten engaged to her long-time boyfriend. But her inclination dissipated when she realized she had gotten a call from all but one family member: Her father.

She shuffled through her phone messages until she heard a voice mail from her uncle. The only words she could make out were "heart attack."

A few minutes later Maddie's sister pulled up, Krista's boyfriend driving and



Maddie Cardell, right, laughs with her older sisters Kellie and Krista. She now lives with them both in Lenexa.

Krista and Kellie in the back seat. Maddie could tell they had been crying.

"Madds, Daddy had a heart attack, and he passed away," Krista choked.

Maddie immediately went into shock. She remembers crying while they drove to Leawood City Park.

"This is ridiculous," she kept thinking. "This isn't happening right now."

They picked a spot in the grass at the park to sit. The remainder of the Cardell family gathered around and cried together, all thinking the same thing.

What happens now?

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The first thing that struck Kansas City Christian administrative assistant Nancy Payne about Maddie was her bright red hair.

"That and her wonderful smile," Payne said.

Payne first met Maddie the day she transferred from SM East to KCC after freshman year, and was almost immediately intrigued by Maddie.

"You just come across people and it's like instantly you have this attraction or drawing to them, and that's the way it was for me with Maddie," Payne said.

Since her mother and father's passing, Payne has been Maddie's first-hand source for counseling and guidance at school. At any given part of the day, Maddie can be found her office complaining to Payne about her amount of homework, picking up a mint from her overflowing bowl of candy canes or there to just talk.

"For me, when Maddie walks in, it's like my whole world lights up," Payne said.

She describes their relationship as open and honest.

"Maddie is incredibly wonderful," Payne said. "She's transparent. So if she's struggling like she has a couple of times since her dad died, she doesn't try and hide it. She gives into her emotions, in a good way."

Payne has also noticed how well Maddie has been handling her current situation.

"Once I found her at her locker crying and after seeing that I just held her for a little bit and told her, 'you know, I'm so sorry sweetheart, there are going to be days like this, many days, and you won't have any clue why it hit you,'" Payne said.

All Maddie did was stand back from Payne, and grin.

"It's crazy isn't it?" Maddie said, wiping away tears.

Payne has always kept Maddie in her heart, but one morning she woke up and something felt different. She kept thinking

about Maddie, and wasn't sure quite why. And then a thought came to her.

Maddie won't have a mom to take her shopping for a junior or senior homecoming dress.

Or a wedding dress. Or be with her on her wedding day.

The thought broke Payne's heart, and that morning, she found Maddie in the hall.

"I said, 'I know you're surrounded with lots of people who love you, but this morning I was broken-hearted that your mama doesn't get to take you shopping for a wedding dress, and if I can go with you, and stand on the sidelines and pretend like I'm your mom, I'm there. I'm raising my hand,'" Payne said.

Maddie responded with a smile.

"Oh Mrs. Payne, you can totally do that if you want!"

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For Maddie, life without parents is something she's had to accept—and in doing so, she's had to grow up. Fast. She admits that she's much stronger than she was before.

"You have a deeper level of understanding," Maddie said. "I think I can handle tough situations a lot better, and I think I can understand things more and understand other people. I went from being fully reliant on my parents to, six months later, having to do a lot of things on my own. Like, little things like making my own lunch, buying my own food, deciding for myself what I'm gonna do with my money or how I spend my time."

For money, Krista and Kellie have taken over Connie's business Personal Greetings, and run it out of their parents' old house. When it comes to Maddie, she's recently moved out of her parents' house and now lives with her sisters in Lenexa, about a 20 drive from away from school. The three of them have plans to relocate to a new home within the next month.

For Maddie, dealing with her loss of parents is a constant struggle, but uses two methods of coping: the first being ignoring it.

"I don't try and think about it too much, because I don't want to be that person crying in the bathroom at school, I don't want to be that sad girl," Maddie said.

The other way she deals with her loss is through dance.

In the basement of her Lenexa home, Maddie and her sisters have set up an area where three or four times a week, Maddie can be found dancing around to Adele or Ben Rector.

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