

Loss leads to establishment of foundation

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Chris Grundner, a Western New York native and SUNY Fredonia graduate, has begun the Kelly Heinz-Grundner Brain Tumor Foundation in memory of his wife, Kelly, who died as the result of a brain tumor.

"The foundation is a chance to make something good out of something bad. If I can take our experience to help others, then her pain and suffering would not have been in vain," said Grundner.

Grundner grew up in the Buffalo area and graduated from SUNY Fredonia with a bachelor's degree in business administration. Little did he know how valuable that knowledge and experience would prove to be.

Kelly and Chris met in 1992 at a little store in Colorado and although their relationship did not blossom until Valentine's Day 1993, they stayed "best friends" until they move back home.

Chris was accepted to the Southern Methodist University in 1995 and the two of them moved to Dallas, while he completed his master's in business administration.

During that time, Kelly was able to move there as well when the business she worked for in Michigan decided to open a division in Dallas that year and offered her the opportunity to open the only new branch.

"Kelly was raised in Michigan. Her family has a snow plowing business and she knew the value of hard work and the value of a dollar," said Chris.

The couple married in August 1997 and by 1999, Chris received an offer to work with the First USA Bank in Delaware. Plans included her attending a college for culinary arts. So they moved there.

In September 2002, Kelly was diagnosed with a primary brain tumor after six months of trying to determine the cause of her headaches.

"She was tough. She never complained and initially we thought it was stress related because she was essentially working two jobs. Nothing brought relief," said Chris.

Doctors initially said she was too young to have a brain tumor and tried medications for allergies and migraines.

Chris spent many hours researching and found Kelly's symptoms to be similar to those of brain tumors, but says he did not read far enough. Kelly convinced her doctor to perform a blood test to determine if cancer was present, which came back negative. The doctor finally agreed, although he thought the symptoms might be Lyme disease or some other illness. It ended up taking six months to get a diagnosis.

Chris began searching again when symptoms continued to get worse. After consulting a friend who was a doctor, he learned that there were two varieties of tumors. Secondary, which start elsewhere in the body and metastasize, and primary, which begin and stay in the brain.

"The doctor thought she was experiencing depression, but she was not the type to get depressed and there did not seem to be any sense of urgency with this," said Chris.

Kelly's tumor was a primary variety and by the time the MRI was performed, it had grown to the size of a golf ball. She began losing coordination, having dizziness, increased need for sleep and eventually blurred vision accompanied the pain.

Within two weeks of diagnosis, an aggressive surgery was performed, leaving Kelly paralyzed on the left side. Surgery was followed by aggressive radiation and chemotherapy.

Kelly remained hopeful throughout her treatment plan and physical therapy to recover her ability to move.

"They told her that the pathways controlling that were gone and that she would have to rebuild them. She basically had to concentrate on making her leg move with



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Chris Grundner

her mind. It was such a miracle," said Chris as he talked about the day he was putting on Kelly's shoes and her leg moved, knocking him over. Kelly made a vow that she wanted to walk to her 30th birthday party. She did, to the amazement of Chris and 125 guests.

In November 2003, there was one clear PET Scan, which increased their hopes. The couple returned to the place they met in Colorado. This would their last trip.

The headaches came back despite the fact that she was receiving chemotherapy in June 2004. Initially, doctors thought that the shunt that drains fluid from the brain had become plugged, but the scans showed otherwise. The golf ball-sized tumor had returned.

"Kelly had a remission from November 2003 through June of 2004. She was still doing chemotherapy, but we really started to think we had the upper hand. Unfortunately she started having headaches again and we found out it was back again, in full force," said Chris. "At that point, there was really nothing that they could do for her. I was lucky enough to be able to take seven full months off from work when she was first diagnosed in 2002 so that I could be with her every moment of every day."

Although there were experimental therapies, they consulted many doctors in hopes of finding a cure for the incurable disease. They were unsuccessful and Kelly died in September.

"She was my best friend and soulmate," Chris said. "It has been a rough road. People need to know that anyone can get a brain tumor, whether black, white, poor or rich. It does not matter."

Chris decided to put his heart into creating a way to share all the knowledge he has gained from the experience and to help him begin moving through the grieving process. As a result, he started the Kelly Heinz-Grundner Brain Tumor Foundation.

His goal is to promote awareness among people and physicians everywhere because early diagnosis and treatment improve the chances of survival. Early surgi-

cal intervention has proven more successful, so he strongly promotes the concept of early diagnosis and treatment.

The second goal is to create a grant program for individuals and families going through the same experience. Due to Chris' type of employment, he was able to take time off from work and had good medical coverage that helped him provide support, care and needed treatment. He hopes to be able to help other families in the same way.

"There is no cure for it. It is an unbeatable disease. Being able to spend time with your loved one is valuable and you can't get that time back," said Chris.

The dragonfly logo and the national brain tumor awareness campaign, "Get Your Head In The Game" can be found at the Web site Chris created called www.GetYourHeadInTheGame.org. The Web site provides information about its goals and programs available.

Another special aspect is the Tulips Against Tumors Tribute started by Susan Morrisson, Chris' mom.

"After Kelly was stricken with the brain tumor, I was beside myself with her suffering and wanted desperately to do something to let her know that she was in my heart every minute of every day," Morrisson said. "Chris reminded me how much she loved tulips."

Bulbs may be ordered for next October for planting at the beginning of November. The program is an acknowledgment of the anniversary of Kelly's death and a way to raise funds distributed through the foundation. Donations to the foundation will help launch "Get Your Head in the Game" and provide financial support to patients and families for whom money is an obstacle to having a fighting chance, research regarding the cause, prevention and patient-specific treatment options. And, it will help raise and maximize human and financial resources through programs such as "The Tulips Against Tumors Tribute."

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Chris says the experience has given him a new perspective on life and allowed him to embrace God and become stronger in his faith. He continues to believe that everyone has to embrace what life has to offer – both the good and bad.

"I know in my heart that God has a plan for me. We will still be a team and if we both do our parts, we will be together again. Most of the grieving process has been about finding God and me," Chris says. "If Kelly had not passed away, I would not be doing this to help other people."

The KHG Brain Tumor Foundation is awaiting its 501 (c)(3) designation. Until that time, all donations will be fully tax-deductible through its relationship with The Delaware Community Foundation, a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization.

Comments on this story may be sent to jspears@observertoday.com.

Know the facts

- This year approximately 176,000 people will be diagnosed with a brain tumor – about 482 every day or 20 every hour
- Brain tumors do not discriminate with respect to age, gender, ethnicity, socioeconomic status or overall fitness level. No matter what your walk of life, you could get a brain tumor.
- Earlier diagnosis leads to a better quality of life after diagnosis.
- There is increased funding to support research to find a cure and better treatment options.