



A Hope and A Prayer

HOW TRAGEDY LED TO A NEW INSPIRATIONAL CHAPTER

WORDS BY PAIGE TOWNLEY

Everyone has a story. Some are straightforward and simple, while others are one struggle after another. Whatever the story may hold, each pleasant surprise or unexpected misfortune isn't the end—it's simply an opportunity to start a new chapter. That's been the theme for Katherine and Jay Wolf, who, no matter the circumstance, find a reason to not only hope, but to encourage others to hope without ceasing as well.

Their story began in college, when they met as freshmen at Samford University in Birmingham, Alabama. At the age of 18, they bonded over their love of food in the school cafeteria, and they solidified their relationship when they got married

future. That's who we were from the very beginning."

Jay and Katherine greatly enjoyed the next few years in Los Angeles, and on the advice of Jay's father, joined a local church, establishing friendships that would soon grow to become exceptionally important to them. "It matters what you found your life on," Jay says. "It would have been easy for us to brush it off and wait, but we felt led to visit a church our very first Sunday in L.A. That was one of the many things we started off with there that created the framework we needed."

Three years later, in Jay's final year of law school, their next unexpected moment came: their oldest son, James. Then, just over six months later, on April 21, 2008, the most unexpected hap-

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in November 2004. "We were 22 and had a hopeful sense of what the future would be," says Jay. "We had aspirations, opportunities, and dreams."

Those dreams led the couple to set out on a new adventure in California—2,500 miles away from home—as Jay planned to attend law school at Pepperdine University, and Katherine hoped to make it in the entertainment industry. "To be honest, I didn't know I got accepted to Pepperdine until we were already halfway across the country," Jay adds. "There was a faith that I knew we were just supposed to go. My mom called me when we were in Texas to let me know my acceptance letter finally came. I don't know if you'd chalk it up to naivety or youthful exuberance, but our hearts were oriented to a hopeful

pened. Katherine suffered a massive brain stem stroke while Jay just happened to be home between his final law school classes. "I hadn't printed out a paper for class, so Katherine says my procrastination saved her life," Jay says. "But it was providential to say the least because her stroke could have happened any time. Thankfully, it happened during a 45-minute window while I was there."

Katherine was rushed to UCLA Medical Center, and one of the best neurosurgeons in the world, Dr. Nestor Gonzalez, just happened to be on call. Katherine wasn't expected to survive. But after a 16-hour surgery, and having more than half of her cerebellum removed, Jay received the two words he had been hoping and praying for: she's alive. "That's all



Photos from the Hope Heals Camp, a free weeklong camp that's all about providing attendees with a safe community, hope, and rest

I heard," he says. "I had no idea what that was going to mean or where it would take us, but I got the two words I was praying for."

Katherine was in the ICU for 40 days and in acute rehab for more than two months. She doesn't remember anything about the stroke, or even being in the ICU. "For me, it was like I was in my housing apartment one day, then woke up in acute rehab the next with my entire body terribly disabled and a feeding tube in my stomach," Katherine explains. "It was crazy to try to wrap my mind around what had happened. I never thought a 26-year-old could have a stroke just out of nowhere."

In total, Katherine endured two years of hospitalization and 11 surgeries—not to mention partial facial paralysis, double vision, partial deafness, and not being able to walk unassisted. While trying to deal with how life suddenly had been turned upside down, Katherine spent the next year and a half in rehab, a trying time as she began to wonder what God could possibly do with her broken body. "In one of my lowest moments after the stroke I wondered if I could go on living," she says. "It felt like I was caught between life and death and wondered if God had made a mistake by leaving me on earth. I read Psalm 139, and in that moment—and every moment since—I've felt chosen by God to live life in a wheelchair. I knew that God had not made a mistake when I felt selected to live a different story than a typical existence. God very much left me alive on earth for a purpose."

Despite the difficult season she and Jay were walking through, they both stayed focused on the purpose behind the suffering and the hope they maintained to surpass it all. "Suffering is a catalyst, giving us a chance to redefine what we thought we were," Katherine says. "When you insert hope and God into that equation, you redefine your life. When we talk about hope, we're not talking about an idea, or about pulling ourselves up by our bootstraps. We're talking about Jesus making a way through us, through our brokenness, to a new life. When your life turns out totally different than what you thought, you know God has shown up with you in the past, and He will always, which is the reason to get out of bed in the morning. Living a life of hope isn't about living a life that's opposite of your hurt. Authentically living in a story that's full of struggle is acknowledging the bittersweet part of hope."

For Katherine and Jay, that led to the establishment of Hope Heals, a nonprofit ministry they started in 2013 that aims to come alongside others who are struggling with all sorts of disabilities—not just physical. "Some of us have external wheelchairs and some have inner wheelchairs," Katherine says. "Some of us have very clear outer disabilities and some



of us are much better at hiding them because they are inside."

Their ministry of encouragement includes sharing their story in different ways—online, speaking engagements, and even through the book they co-authored in 2016 called *Hope Heals: A True Story of Overwhelming Loss and an Overcoming Love*. It's also on display through their everyday life, which was blessed in 2015 with the family expanding. Having never given up hope—and against all odds—Katherine gave birth to James' little brother, John.

Two years ago, they added the Hope Heals Camp, a free weeklong camp that's all about providing attendees with a safe community, hope, and rest. This year, 800 participants from 30 states and the United Kingdom, representing 20 kinds of disabilities, attended over the course of two weeks. They also have a new book coming out in 2020 entitled *Suffer Strong: How to Survive Anything by Redefining Everything*. The newest book focuses on lessons they have learned, reminding readers once again that their story didn't end with the stroke—they were just beginning a new chapter. "On this earth, we want to fix what can't be fixed," Katherine says. "We want to force a different outcome. What we can change is how we think about the story we have. When you realize you've been called to do something different, that's OK. You can dream a new dream that you never saw yourself living. Just because it's hard doesn't mean you can't embrace it. Suffering of any kind is never the end of someone's story. It's just a new beginning." □