

## Our Story

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Kurtis' story begins with a sore throat. Antibiotics did not make it go away. CT scan revealed enlarged lymph nodes and a thickening at the base of his tongue. He had surgery December 2011 for a biopsy and removal of lymph nodes. While waiting patiently during surgery, I had a lot of time to reflect. I knew good or bad, whichever it was, we would get through it. You see, Kurtis and I began dating when I was 15. We married after I graduated from high school and then he joined the US Navy. All we have ever had to depend on, was each other.

The surgeon confirmed our worst fears. Kurtis has Squamous Cell Carcinoma of the Oral/Head and Neck. Next he went through chemo and radiation. Kurtis took short term disability during his radiation treatments. During this time Kurtis was mostly on a liquid diet, however, he passed his time at home by watching the series Diners/Drive-Ins and Dives. He began a bucket list of all the places that he wanted to eat within an eight hour driving distance from Hutchinson.

When he got well enough to eat again (things tasted like s\*\*t) he wanted to go on road trips to the best diners. We began making more memories! He was "Cancer Free" for approximately three months. The Cancer was growing with a vengeance. Kurtis was losing weight and had difficulty swallowing. He underwent another surgery, this time they scheduled a bilateral neck dissection and biopsy of the tongue. They were unable to complete the surgery, the Cancer had spread too much into areas the surgeon was uncomfortable operating on. My best friend was by my side when I received the news. It was devastating.

Kurtis then had a feeding tube put in, he weighed 101 pounds. Kurtis had his major surgery at KU Hospital on April 3, 2013. The 12 hour surgery was thought to be successful. They removed his tongue, replaced with a muscle flap, dissected his neck of everything that had cancer. He was given a trachea to allow him to breathe. The surgeon said that had we not have had the surgery done Kurtis would have lived, maybe, a few more months. Therefore, on this day, his 50th birthday, Kurtis was given more time. At this point, we knew he wouldn't be able to speak again, we knew he wouldn't be able to eat again, we knew he would have to breathe through a trachea but we also knew we had LIFE, we had Kurtis. We could live without everything else but we didn't want to live without him.

The next few months were spent healing and getting used to our new life. As long as he had pen and paper or his white board, he was able to communicate. He began receiving chemo again once he was well enough. Not even three months later, the Cancer was spreading again, rapidly. Chemo was thought to have slowed it down until the ulcers started appearing around his neck. November we entered into the Hospice of Reno County program. Kurtis had a very near to death episode the day

before Thanksgiving. We thought, including all medical professionals, that Kurtis was going to die. He was admitted to the Hospice House. A very near and dear friend, medical professional and my boss, at the time, evaluated Kurtis. He believed that the hallucinations and erratic behavior was medication induced. We stopped the drugs in question and when Kurtis woke up, he began to get better. Not only did Kurtis walk into the Hospice House but he walked out. It was not his time yet. Kurtis made the most out of each and every day. We tried to manage his pain and spent as much time with family and friends that we could. Each day we made memories.

Kurtis' goal was to make it through the holidays, he did. He wanted to see the New Year, he did. I asked him if we could set our 30th wedding anniversary as our next goal, we came close. We had happy moments, we had sad moments. We knew that his time was near, we just didn't know how near.

This was very important to Kurtis and I hope that you all will take a little something away from this short story. He wanted to know in his heart that he has not gone through this for nothing. I promised him that I would be his voice, for him. Oral/Head and Neck Cancer caused by the HPV is rapidly becoming more and more common. This is serious. Look it up, learn about it, learn what causes it, and learn what can make it worse. Here is what we have learned. HPV is prevalent in most of us at one point in time or another. Don't let this happen to your kids, this can be prevented, get vaccinated.

Kurtis was adamant that not only girls be vaccinated but boys too. Educate yourself, educate others. Cancer sucks but cancer sucks worse when it can be prevented. Listen to your body, if it hurts, continues to hurt and doesn't go away – go see your doctor, don't think that it is nothing and don't put it off. If your doctor cannot see you, find another one. Early detection is key. Good and regular dental exams with the Cancer Screening is very important – every six months!! Don't assume that your dentist automatically does this, not all dentists do. You will be the first person to notice something that is new and different, listen to your body. If it doesn't feel right, then it probably isn't.

Enjoy life, life is too short. Kurtis thought he was invincible. Yesterday is gone, tomorrow isn't promised, LIVE TODAY! Love one another, enough with the hate and drama. TALK, SING, LAUGH, BREATHE, EAT, KISS. We are a gift, life is a gift and we are not INVINCIBLE. Kurtis died on February 20, 2014. Kurtis is pain free and not suffering any longer. He will always be with us in our hearts. Start Living and Love like there is no Tomorrow!

Thank you,

His loving Wife, Dana