

A living legacy

Though Mother's Day is sad for Snyder woman, she takes comfort in knowing her daughter gave one last precious gift

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Mother's Day is a time for remembering our moms and all the ways they touched us, gave of themselves for us and even gave us life itself. But one Snyder mom will instead be remembering a daughter and all the lives she touched, and how by her death she gave life and hope to others.

Autumn Pollard was a bright, happy teen-ager who had recently graduated from high school and was attending classes at Western Texas College. She had overcome many adversities in her lifetime, yet she remained upbeat and enthusiastic about the future. She wanted to follow a career in law enforcement.

When she died Sept. 3, 1997, her parents knew what they had to do. Her mom, Suzanne Pollard, remembered the fateful conversation.

"When Autumn was getting her driver's license a few years ago, she told us then that if anything should happen to her, she wanted to make sure her organs would be given to people who needed them," Suzanne said. "I asked her if she was sure, and she said absolutely. Once she made up her mind, there was no changing it."



Autumn's grandmother, Bobbie Kruger, added, "She said if she were gone, it would be wrong not to share with someone else who could be helped by it. I wasn't sure about it, but it was what Autumn wanted and it's what we did."

"But that was Autumn," continued Suzanne. "She was always thinking about other people and looking for ways to help."

A wonderful gift

Autumn Brooke Pollard was born Dec. 19, 1978. Her parents, Jim and Suzanne, had lost another baby, Jamie, who had been stillborn three years earlier. Autumn was delivered early by Caesarean section.

From the start Autumn had a number of health problems. Doctors were concerned about her liver, which was protruding too far from her abdomen. She had several unformed ribs on that side of her body. She was on oxygen continuously for several days around Christmas and was finally diagnosed with a potassium deficiency, common in premature babies.

In addition, Autumn suffered from scoliosis. Several of her vertebrae bones in her back were only growing on one side, causing a severely curved spine.

When she was 18 months old, she underwent a spinal fusion surgery. It was just the first of several surgeries she would endure to correct various birth defects.

After that surgery, she was fitted with a heavy plaster body cast which covered her from shoulders to hips. She wore it until she was 3, when she was fitted with a series of fiberglass jackets that she wore until reaching age 12.

In September of 1991, Autumn entered Scottish Rite Hospital for Children in Dallas for her final series of operations. The earlier fusion was reversed, and she was fitted with a "halo" traction device, which she wore for four months.



Autumn Pollard, seen in her senior class photo at the left, died last September at age 18. But her mother, Suzanne Pollard, center, and her grandmother, Bobbie Kruger, right, are happy that Autumn continues to live in the lives of others through her final generous act of organ donation.

Sometimes, Suzanne said, she would cry when she saw her daughter with the heavy frame around her head and the screws drilled into her skull.

"But she'd just look at me," recalled Suzanne, "and she'd say, 'Oh, Mom, don't worry about it, it's gonna be OK.' And it was."

"They would send Autumn to go see other kids," said Suzanne. "These kids would go in there and sometimes be really scared.

Autumn would go in and visit with them and answer their questions. They could relate to her and she could relate to them."

In December of 1991, Autumn had two steel rods installed in her spine to permanently correct the curvature. After that she continued to make great progress. She had just turned 13.

Busy teen-ager

Autumn was involved in numerous activities at school. She played in the band and enjoyed singing in the choir. She was on the high school newspaper staff and enjoyed giving demonstrations in the home and family living classes.

She was also active at North College Avenue Baptist Church where she attended. She taught Bible school, directed crafts for Vacation Bible School and went visiting with the young people every Monday night. She had a special affinity for the elderly and enjoyed going to the nursing

homes to visit.

But her real passion, said her parents, was Exploring. Autumn was a charter member of Law Enforcement Explorer Post 573, sponsored by the Snyder Police Department. She joined in the eighth grade and rose to the rank of lieutenant.

"She loved it," said her dad, Jim. "They would ride with officers and help with traffic and crowd control at ball games. They would also compete against other law enforcement Explorers.

She soon decided law enforcement was what she wanted to do with her life," he said. "She thought it was another way she could make a difference and help people."

Autumn also had a chance for hands-on experience. Her father is a paramedic with the Anson Emergency Medical Service. She would go with him on calls to accident scenes. She met and became friends with Jones County Sheriff Robby Wadeking and he invited her to ride along with him.

"It wasn't long after that that Robby put her to work answering the phones," said Jim. "He was impressed by the courage and determination she had shown, and he hired her the next day. After further training she was working by herself in less than a week."

"She loved it," agreed Suzanne. "She had learned so much through her Exploring training and was able to go right to work. She was

so excited."

It was June 1997, just a month after her high school graduation.

But all was not well.

Final crisis

Autumn had begun having severe migraine headaches in December of 1996.

"She had an extreme sensitivity to light when she'd be having an attack," said Suzanne, "and her skin was hypersensitive to touch. She'd also have a lot of nausea with the headaches."

"She'd get them once a month," Suzanne said. "The doctors diagnosed them as classic migraines and noted they were probably hormone related. She was put on medicine to control the symptoms and seemed to be managing OK."

"But we were really disappointed because she was having a migraine during her graduation, so she had to miss commencement. As usual, she told me not to worry about it, that it would be OK."

Also as usual, Autumn didn't allow problems to get in the way of what she wanted to do. She enrolled in Western Texas College with a major in criminal justice and continued to work part-time for the Jones County Sheriff's Office.

It was the Tuesday after Labor Day, Sept. 3, 1997. Autumn woke up with a migraine and said she was going to stay home, take her medicine and go back to bed. Suzanne asked if she needed to

stay home with her, but Autumn wouldn't hear of it. So Suzanne went on to her job with the Head Start Center in Snyder.

It would be the last time she spoke with Autumn.

About 10 that morning, Suzanne tried to call and check on Autumn but didn't get an answer. She rushed home and found her choking. Nausea from the migraine had caused her to vomit and aspirate it back into her lungs. A paramedic neighbor began clearing her airway and performing CPR.

Autumn was flown by careflight helicopter to a Lubbock hospital, but her brain had been too long without oxygen and nothing could be done. She was declared brain dead.

Autumn was buried in Haskell's Willow Cemetery with full law enforcement honors, including a flag-draped coffin, honor guard and "Taps."

She received tributes from numerous law enforcement agencies from Scurry County, Fisher County, Jones County, Anson, Stamford, Haskell, the Texas Department of Public Safety and the Texas Rangers.

While at the hospital, in the midst of shock and grief, however, Suzanne remembered Autumn's request to be an organ donor.

Gift of life

Because of her injuries and the resuscitation efforts, Autumn's

heart and lungs were not suitable for transplant. However, doctors found donor matches for other organs and quickly went into action to bring some good from this tragedy.

On Sept. 22 — less than three weeks after Autumn's gift — Suzanne opened a letter from Karen Wilhelm with the LifeGift Organ Donation Center in Lubbock. It was the news she had been hoping to hear.

"The precious gift of Autumn's liver saved the life of a 46-year-old salesman from California," the letter said. "He is married with five children and is so thankful for his gift. He is looking forward to a life of being able to spend time with his family."

The news about Autumn's other donations was just as positive. One kidney went to a 31-year-old father from Houston who had been waiting for more than two years and is now dialysis-free and looking forward to traveling with his family. Another California man, a screenwriter, had been waiting for more than a year for his kidney transplant. He also is now dialysis-free.

Suzanne has written to the recipients in care of the LifeGift Center, which will forward her letters. She is hoping to hear from them and possibly someday to meet them. She wants to tell them about Autumn.

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Gift

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"I want to tell them about her and what she was like. I want them to know about her long hair and the color of her eyes and to know about this girl who had so much love in her heart.

"She gave the ultimate gift," Suzanne said. "It was her last act of kindness. I'm so thankful they're all doing well.

"I will always believe she was God's gift to us," she continued. "Now she's given that gift of life to others. The one that probably touches my heart the most is the father of five, to know that he'll have the chance to see his kids grow up and be with them. Autumn would like that."

Her father said that on the night she died the waiting room at the Lubbock hospital was full of police and emergency personnel. "It was then that we became fully aware of how many lives she had touched and just how much she was loved," he said.

One more gift

A few months after her death, Jim and Suzanne finally made the decision to rearrange Autumn's bedroom. It was then they were faced with another problem.

"Autumn had a huge collection of stuffed bears," said Suzanne. "We thought about boxing them all up and keeping them, but we decided that wouldn't be what Autumn would want."

Instead, she said, they saved out a few special ones and gave the rest — nearly 100 stuffed bears — to Toys for Tots, the Jones and Scurry County sheriff's offices and to other charities.

"I'm glad to know Autumn's bears are being put to good use. It's just one more way that she's continuing to give to others," Suzanne said.

"She taught us about courage and love and giving to others," Suzanne said. "And I'm so proud that at least a little part of her is continuing to live on in the lives of these other people. It's what she wanted."

Grandmother Bobbys was more succinct. "She was our angel on earth for 16 years."

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