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The Medicinal Power of Small Celebrations

Kristina Fritz

Nova Southeastern University, kf1045@mynsu.nova.edu

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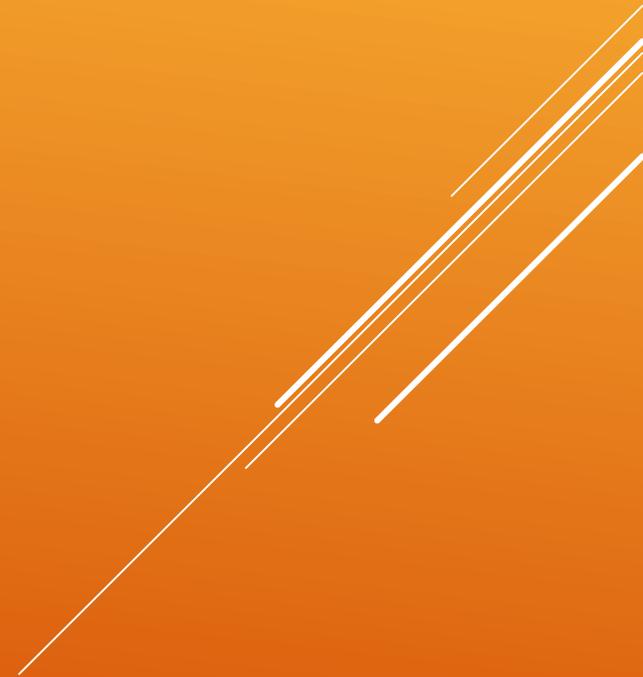
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Artists Statement: Kristina Fritz

This personal essay provides a first-hand account of a patient and their family celebrating a change in perspective brought about by experiencing a clinical trial.



The Medicinal Power of Small Celebrations

In 2001, a ten-year-old blonde girl from Florida often complained of fainting spells. She would stand up and walk a few steps and pass out. Her face would become very pale, especially around her mouth and her limbs were cold and her quality of life was starting to deteriorate. She could not participate in school events and slept most of the day. Her parents were concerned and brought her to a doctor. Her heart was severely hypertrophied, but they could not discern the underlying cause. She had normal blood pressure, no arrhythmias, but an echocardiogram showed a leaky right sided atrioventricular heart valve. Her physicians wanted to determine via cardiac catheterization imaging, if there was a small hole or valvular disorder that could be fixed and return the child's quality of life.

The parents had hope, and they were looking forward to being able to help their daughter and hear the news that her problem could be fixed. After the cardiac catheterization, the physicians determined that no anatomic abnormality existed, but that she had high pulmonary pressures that could indicate pulmonary hypertension. "Don't read the internet!" was the doctor's advice. "The disease, which I believe is pulmonary hypertension, is being heavily researched and many advances have been made and the internet is not entirely up to date."

The physician told her parents that there was a specialist in New York that was currently researching this problem and thought that he/she could provide some answers and solutions for the little girl. Although, it was not the news that the parents had expected, the medication the physician prescribed did improve their daughter's current quality of life and they had a name of a specialist. The parents hoped that the specialist could offer a new solution that could bring their daughter back to health, maybe even a cure.

The child's parents did read information about her diagnosis on the internet and immediately regretted it. The words they read haunted their daily thoughts. "Sudden death. Five to ten-year prognosis." However, they were determined to find answers. Within three months they had scheduled an appointment with the New York specialist and signed their daughter up as a subject in the specialist's five-year research study.

She would be required to spend a week participating in tests and would consult with the specialist at the end of the week. These parents would do anything to try to find some answers for their daughter's health challenges and only wanted to help their daughter. When they arrived at the New York hospital, they were given a list of tests that the young girl would have to undertake and a map of the hospital. The family felt like they were easily lost in a maze of hospital staff, patients, and jargon they did not understand.

Their days consisted of waking up early, navigating themselves to the part of the hospital that performed the test, and waiting until the tests could be performed. The tests were many, including: PET, CT, XRAY, stress tests, family blood work, pulmonary function test, plethysmography, echocardiograms, tracer tests, etc. After the first day of testing, the family went back to their hotel and celebrated getting through the day by going out to dinner at the small restaurant that was next to the hotel. They realized how lucky they were to participate in this study without any fees and when they initially traveled to New York, they thought that their daughter would not survive. Now, they realized that their child was most likely one of the least sick patients in the study.

They were feeling much more optimistic after speaking with other patients in the study throughout the day. That dinner ending the first day of the trial, was an unplanned celebration and today is still an important memory that changed the perspective of the entire family.

A celebration need not always be a large social gathering, especially in medicine. For families with loved one who are ill, a little bit of good news, a new perspective, or a small kindness becomes a thing worthy of celebration.

In our lives, there are many formalized celebrations shaped by our society; religious, geographical, familial. However, in medicine, smaller, less formal, and more spontaneous celebrations are often witnessed. Patients, families, and doctors celebrate positive test results, lifestyle changes, or answers to their health problems. Small celebrations can inspire hope and they can bring joy and relief that can have a healing effect for patients and their families. After that dinner, that eleven-year-old girl was celebrated and encouraged.

She was going to live.

A decorative graphic consisting of several parallel white lines of varying lengths, slanted diagonally from the bottom right towards the top right, set against the orange background.

About the artist: **Kristina Fritz**

KRISTINA FRITZ IS A FIRST-YEAR MEDICAL STUDENT. SHE RECEIVED A BACHELOR'S DEGREE IN POLITICAL SCIENCE, SOCIAL SCIENCE, AND BIOLOGY, AS WELL AS A MASTER'S DEGREE IN SOCIOLOGY AND BIO-ENGINEERING FROM FLORIDA ATLANTIC UNIVERSITY. SHE IS INTERESTED IN *THE ART OF MEDICINE* AND HOW PATIENT CARE AFFECTS THE PATIENT'S HEALING PROCESS AND OVERALL HEALTH.