

Touching heartbroken families

by Carli Harrington

Watching a child losing weight, hair, and healthy color isn't anything a mother should have to go through. But Kelli Martzall of Casper has done it twice. Cancer struck two of her children.

How can a single mother of three handle this type of situation? Kelli says she handled it most importantly with God. But, she also says she could never have made it without a group devoted to helping families with children diagnosed with tumors and other childhood cancers — Jason's Friends Foundation.

"A co-worker told me about Jason's Friends," Kelli said. "I called and they offered to help emotionally and with rent. They got on the Internet and found out what I could expect... Jason's Friends offered to take care of everything. I would have been a total wreck without them."

Kelli's 16-year-old daughter, Melissa, was diagnosed with a well-developed spinal cancer 14 months ago. Melissa immediately was Life-Flighted to Denver Children's Hospital with a 50-50 chance of survival.

Just two months later, Melissa died. "The autopsy showed she was totally cancer-free, but the chemo was too much for her," says Kelli. "Her body just couldn't take any more."

After Melissa died, Jason's

Friends "were still there for me," Kelli says. "They walked through step by step with me. They helped me write an obituary and pick out a casket."

Then only four months after Melissa died, Kelli's 8-year-old daughter, Sarah, was diagnosed with a brain tumor. "The first thing that went through my mind, is that I'd lose Sarah too," says Kelli.

Sarah was sent to Denver's Children Hospital. Kelli learned Sarah had a good chance for recovery because the type of cancer she had wasn't likely to return. Sarah began chemotherapy in September 1998 and went from 60 pounds to 40 pounds.

While receiving treatments, Sarah would take a time off in between to give her body a break. "Sarah lost her hair," says Kelli, "but it wasn't as big of a deal to her as it was Melissa."

At the beginning of December, Sarah began radiation. She received 13 treatments, then doctors determined she was in remission.

"Sarah's doing well," says Kelli,

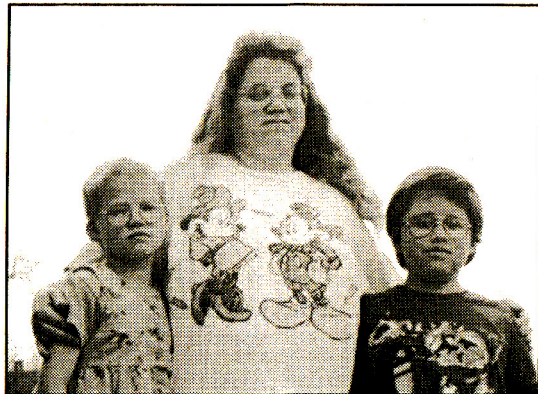
"but we still have to take her to Denver every three months for the next five years just to make sure."

Jason's Friends

According to Jason's Friends co-founder, Lisa Eades, how the group helped Kelli is typically how the foundation wants to help. "We assign a family advocate ... These people are always there emotionally for these families. They are going through it with them, knowing what their child is going through."

Eades knows this type of relationship is important in such devastating circumstances. Her son, Jason, died in 1995. "Friends watched what we went through and decided something

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Kelli Martzall (center), with her children, is grateful to the Jason's Friends Foundation after cancer struck two of her three kids.

Photo by Django Bohren