



WHEN BROKEN HEARTS Become One

During 2006, the Issaquah Fifth Ward experienced several crises within a few months' time. Their response is an example of the gospel in action—and of the blessings of ward unity.

By Amanda B. Lewis

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The day that school got out for the youth in the Issaquah Fifth Ward in Washington State, USA, seemed like the start of any normal summer. That Monday in June 2006 the young men, young women, their leaders, and several other ward members gathered at noon to leave for youth conference. After an hour-long drive to their campsite, the group settled in for three days of swimming, playing, and team- and testimony-building activities.

Alexa Jensen

On the second day, however, 13-year-old Alexa Jensen was swimming in a lake with some other young women when she had a seizure and slipped beneath the water.

Alexa suffered from a rare liver disease that had left her with developmental disabilities, but she was a good swimmer—she had won many swimming medals at the region and state levels of Special Olympics. When Alexa's mother, Denise, couldn't spot her, she suspected a seizure had led to Alexa's disappearance and yelled for help.

The youth immediately started searching for Alexa. After four or five minutes, they found her and pulled her onto a nearby dock. The youth gathered around and watched as their friend received CPR.

"We were all in shock," recalls Chandler Balkman, the Jensens' home teacher at the time. Chandler, who had been playing a game with Alexa before she disappeared, stood nearby, waiting to help if he could. But all that was left to do was watch and pray. "We just were thinking, 'How could this be happening?' It felt surreal," he says.

Alexa arrived at the hospital with no pulse. The medical team at the hospital stabilized her heartbeat, but her brain function never returned to normal. Two days later, Alexa died.

The Jensens' overwhelming shock and grief were softened by the love and support they received from the ward. Members of the ward helped with the funeral arrangements, visited, sent cards expressing their love, brought meals, called to see how they were doing, and above all, made sure the Jensens knew they were loved and remembered.

"Because the accident happened at a church activity, going through the grief together was comforting, in a lot of ways," Denise says. "Not that you want others to have to suffer too, but it was very good for us, her family, because we saw how much everyone loved Alexa."

Alexa's father, Gary, recalls: "We realized we needed to help each other and comfort each other. Love from our ward got us through that initial tough time."

Chandler Balkman

As the ward continued to grieve Alexa's death, another accident happened. Like several ward members, the Balkman family lives on Lake Sammamish and spends a lot of time on the water. One August evening at sundown, 16-year-old Chandler and his father, Steve—the Jensens' home teachers—were swimming and decided to race one another to a nearby buoy. On the way back to shore, Steve heard a boat approach and saw it pass directly over where he thought Chandler was swimming underwater.

Chandler's older sister, Jessica, was driving the boat home after visiting friends. Neither Chandler nor Steve had noticed the boat was missing from the covered boat lift at the dock, so they hadn't been listening or watching for it to return. Because of the time of day and the direction she was driving, Jessica couldn't see anything in the water.

It wasn't until Chandler surfaced that Jessica realized that Chandler's right leg had been caught in the boat's propeller and had been nearly severed at the hip.

Steve swam to Chandler and held him up. "It was just a horrible feeling," says Steve. "At that moment I didn't think he was going to make it. I thought these were my last few moments with my son. So I held him close, and we started swimming in."

The boat had stalled, so Jessica was unable to go to them, but she called for paramedics on her cell phone. Geoff, Chandler's older brother, was painting the house when he heard the yelling. He hurried out in a canoe to Steve and Chandler, and got both of them on board without tipping over the canoe. As soon as they reached the dock, Steve gave Chandler a blessing.

Gary Folkman, who was then serving as the bishop



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of the ward, lived four houses away and came running when he heard the commotion. He helped Geoff and Steve carry Chandler inside the house, where it was warm. Chandler's femoral artery had been severed, and he was losing blood rapidly. Steve was trying to stop the blood flow when Bishop Folkman asked if he could give Chandler another blessing. Although the blessing never said Chandler's life would be saved, the bishop promised Chandler his "intellect and sense of humor would be preserved." This gave Steve hope that his son would live. But Chandler's life was still in immediate danger.

Susan and Stephanie, Chandler's mother and younger sister, arrived home about that time. An ambulance came and rushed Chandler—and Steve—to the hospital. Susan paused for a moment after they left, wondering what to do. She knew she needed to be with Chandler, but she also knew Jessica was still on the lake, uninformed and distraught. Jessica didn't know whether her brother was dead or alive.

Susan told Stephanie to call Jessica's Young Women leader, Tami Glauser, who came over to the Balkmans' home and stayed with Jessica until she could join her family at the hospital. "I knew that Jessica would be in good hands," says Susan.

Meanwhile, doctors were trying to save Chandler. When he arrived at the hospital, he had no pulse, had lost 60 to 75 percent of his blood, and was considered dead. But doctors were able to revive and then stabilize him. After several blood transfusions, they began surgery to amputate his leg and treat several broken bones and deep cuts. It was the first night of many Chandler would

spend in the hospital, and the first of 30 surgeries.

Members of the Issaquah Fifth Ward rallied around the Balkmans as they had the Jensens. Although the needs of each family were different, the ward quickly responded with thoughtful acts of kindness and support.

People provided meals, cleaned, did laundry, completed yard work, and performed a host of other tasks, Susan remembers. A nurse in the ward helped coordinate Chandler's visiting schedule. More than 100 ward members visited Chandler. Chris Kelly, Chandler's Sunday School teacher and also a doctor, took time to talk with Chandler in depth about a prosthetic leg and to answer his questions. Several families in the ward helped care for Stephanie while her mother spent time at the hospital. Chandler's priest quorum set up a projector and had a movie night in his room for an activity.

Christine Callans

Chandler made steady progress. Three months later, as he was nearing his release date, the ward was rocked again when 34-year-old Christine Callans' heart suddenly failed.

Chris, who had been a member of the Church for three years at the time, has a condition called hypertrophic cardiomyopathy. Among



ENDURING TOGETHER

"From bearing one another's burdens as ward members, we have learned several lessons:

"1. The Lord's organization is fully adequate to know and care for those with even the most dire emotional and spiritual needs.

"2. Adversity can bring us closer to God, with a renewed and enlightened appreciation for prayer and the Atonement, which covers pain and suffering in all their manifestations.

"3. Members who suffer tragedy firsthand often experience an increased capacity for love, compassion, and understanding. They become the first, last, and often the most effective responders in giving comfort and showing compassion to others.

"4. A ward, as well as a family, draws closer together as it endures together—what happens to one happens to all.

"5. And perhaps most important, we can each be more compassionate and caring because we have each had our own personal trials and experiences to draw from. We can endure together.

"I rejoice in belonging to such a loving and caring organization. No one knows better how to bear one another's burdens, mourn with those



who mourn, and comfort those who stand in need of comfort. I choose to call it 'enduring together.' What happens to one happens to all."

Bishop Richard C. Edgley, "Enduring Together," *Liahona and Ensign*, Nov. 2007, 11.



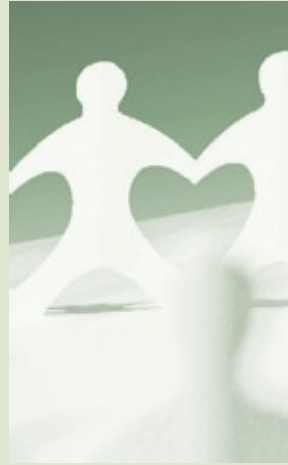
other side effects, it can cause the heart to experience arrhythmia, or disruption of electric pulses, and to stop beating. Chris was aware of her condition, but it had never caused her any trouble before. The morning of October 4, she had started her early-morning exercise routine when her heart experienced uneven pulses and she collapsed. Her son, Brian, who was 10 years old at the time, found her lying on the floor and ran for his father, Joe.

Brian called for emergency help, and Joe started CPR. Before long, paramedics arrived and started Chris's heart again. As the ambulance drove off, Joe wondered what to do with his children. A neighbor offered to take care of his daughters, and Joe called ward member Sabrina Larsen, who lived a couple of streets away, to watch his sons. Joe, who is a member of another church, knew Sabrina because he occasionally attends LDS Sunday services with his family. "She was here in what seemed like 60 seconds," Joe recalls. She took the Callans' sons and told Joe not to worry about them.

As the ambulance sped to the hospital, Chris's heart failed again, and when she arrived at the emergency room, she was clinically dead. As doctors worked to resuscitate Chris, another emergency-room doctor arrived. Eric Shipley, a friend, ward member, and doctor, was not on call that day, but when he heard what had happened, he came to see if he could offer Joe support.

"As I was driving to the hospital, I called the emergency room, and they said she still didn't have a heartbeat," says Eric. "I knew her chances were abysmal."

Eric remembers that when he arrived, it was a "pretty chaotic scene." After nearly an hour of resuscitation



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efforts, "for reasons that aren't completely clear to me, she regained a pulse," Eric recalled.

After Chris was moved to a cardiac unit, Joe became aware that members of the ward were in the waiting room. Matt Balkman, a member of the bishopric and Chandler's uncle, told Joe he didn't want him to have to worry about anything but Chris. Matt insisted that he and other ward members coordinate the logistics of picking up extended family members, watching over the Callans' home, and making sure their four children were well cared for. They also promised to be a buffer for Joe, keeping people at arm's length until he was ready for visitors.

"The ward was great," recalls Joe. "People mobilized like nothing else I've ever seen."

Although Chris's heartbeat was back to normal, doctors warned Joe that it was unlikely she would recover all of her brain functions. If she did wake up, they cautioned, she might not be anything like the Chris he knew. At this news, ward members steeled themselves to handle yet another tragedy.

But the morning after her collapse, Chris woke up on her own. Over the next several days, her heartbeat remained stable and her brain functions and memory returned. On October 12—the same day Chandler was released—Chris went home.

The ward's support continued. For months, ward members brought meals and visited, while still respecting the family's privacy. For Chris, it was a testament of the truthfulness of the gospel.

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different way of thinking about relationships and people.”

Claire Calhoun

Not every family who was in crisis that summer experienced trial as a result of a single catastrophic incident. Mike and Debbie Calhoun faced a trial that started long before Alexa’s accident and continued after Chris and Chandler were released from the hospital.

Their daughter Claire was born in 2005 with bone marrow failure. The Calhouns were not aware of her condition; none of the tests before or after Claire’s birth had suggested any problems. But when Claire was about six weeks old, she went into respiratory failure and cardiac arrest. When doctors tested her blood level, it was one-seventh of what it should have been.

For the next year, Claire received blood transfusions every three weeks. The ward consistently visited the Calhouns at the hospital and at home, sending notes, bringing meals, completing household tasks, and taking their sons to Scout activities. Claire’s medical needs continued; she received frequent transfusions during the four-month period that the Jensen, Balkman, and Callans families’ experiences took place.

“When Alexa drowned, Claire was in the hospital. When Chandler had his accident, Claire was in the hospital. When Chris Callans had her heart failure, Claire was in the hospital,” Debbie says. Yet the Calhouns were still eager to serve. For instance, Debbie had taken a meal to the Balkmans in the first few days after Chandler’s accident. It was then that she learned that Susan would appreciate a visit from her. “I was so happy to be able to serve,” she remembers. “All these things had been done



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for us; this was one thing I could do for somebody else.”

A Ward Family

Debbie’s attitude of being willing to serve was common for members of the Issaquah Fifth Ward who were quick to respond to each successive event. “As the difficulties continued, the ward’s capacity to deal with those issues became larger,” Debbie says. “I wouldn’t change the experiences I have had because in the worst of times, you see the grace of God and the absolute goodness of others.”

“The ward has been right there with us,” says Mike, Claire’s father. “They rise to any occasion.”

Although the incidents of 2006 were dramatic, ward members realize that others’ struggles are just as real even if they’re not as apparent. “Everybody has adversity,” Susan Balkman says. “Because it’s not always public, like ours was, we have to watch and listen for ways to help others.”

The events of five years ago “stretched all of us to a great degree,” says former bishop Gary Folkman, “but it was also very unifying.”

Today, members of the Issaquah Fifth Ward remain a tight-knit group. “What really made the difference to me was the outpouring of love from the ward as a whole,” says Steve Balkman, who now serves as bishop. “When you feel loved, you feel like you can get through most anything, and we definitely felt loved. That feeling is something I will never forget.

“To me it was the gospel of Jesus Christ in action, the way that it’s supposed to work.” ■

To read an update on the Balkman, Calhoun, Callans, and Jensen families, visit ensign.lds.org.