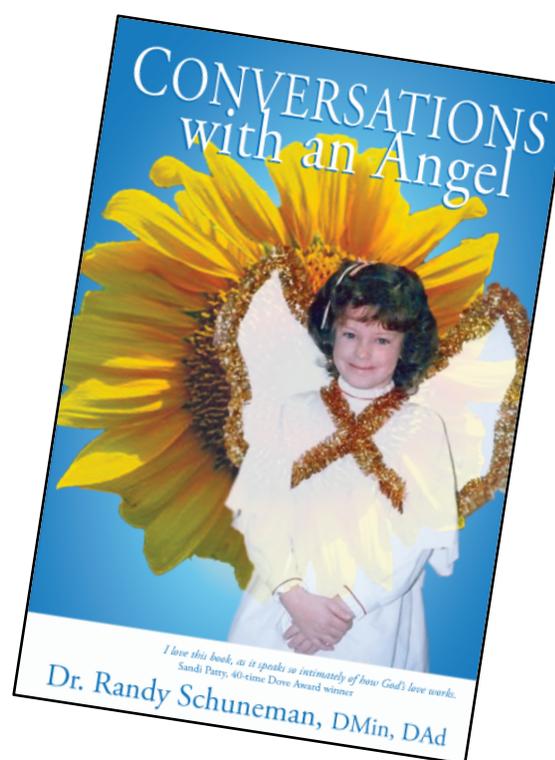


# A FUNNY THING HAPPENED ON THE WAY TO CHEMO

a *Conversations with an Angel* “Web Extra”

by Randy Schuneman

It is very hard to hide the fact that your child has cancer. You hate to see your child not only suffer the physical illness, but also the social rejection. The first thing we tried to hide was Jennie’s baldness. Jennie had beautiful, thick, curly hair. We had to watch her hair fall out in clumps. Jennie’s pillow would be covered every morning with *globbs* of hair. I think the



loss of Jennie’s hair was hardest for Bonnie. One of the things that mothers love to do is fix their daughter’s hair. Pretty bows were a part of raising a daughter, but that chance was fading fast.

The solution for a cancer patient’s hair loss is easy: a wig. How do you find a wig that compares to what Jennie’s hair had been? It was not easy. Bonnie found something that was brown and curly. Jennie did not

look close to herself, but the wig was as close as we could find. Like most men who wear toupees, anyone could tell that Jennie was wearing a wig. We had to work through that adjustment.

You probably already know this, but there are at least two types of wig: real hair and artificial hair. There is a big difference. One looks fairly natural. The other looks like plastic. We got an artificial wig and this proved to be a bad choice. At four, Jennie did not like wearing her wig because it was hot. That first summer was like all summers in Kansas—temperatures in the 90's to over 100, high humidity, very little wind. Jennie's first response when she came home from somewhere was to *rip* her wig off and begin playing. Without us realizing it, Jennie often put her wig on top of a lamp in her bedroom. Man-made wigs melt. Do you know how I know that? One day, we found Jennie's wig melted to the top of her yellow lamp. The heat of the light bulb had performed a miracle. Her wig became toast!

We replaced the curly-brown wig with a straight-blond one. It did not match Jennie's real hair in any way, shape or form. You did not have to look closely at all to know that this wig was a wig. However, it was better than taking Jennie somewhere without one. Once, a little boy came into the Dairy Queen where our family was sitting. He saw Jennie, stopped and said, "Dad, look at the boy!" You will never know how much that hurt!

Even with the blonde wig, Jennie found great joy in taking it off. Bonnie and I got used to watching the process. However, not everyone was ready for that transformation. There was a family in our church named Brummett. Randy and Sherry had two little girls who were good friends with Jennie. We were going to meet the family for a Sunday meal after church. We asked if the two Brummett girls could go with us. The parents agreed. Jennie's favorite place to ride was on the armrest of the front seat. I know...we would get arrested today for child endangerment, but this was

the *good ole days*. The Brummett girls had seen Jennie without her wig, but when Jennie climbed in the front seat and ripped off her wig, I looked back in the rearview mirror to see two sets of pretty brown eyes that were the size of a Silver Dollar. How did she do that?

One of the uncontrollable challenges we faced was Jennie's reaction to her chemo treatment. On the way home from her first radiation treatment, she seemed just fine. The treatment did not hurt. We thought, "Maybe this won't be as bad as we thought." About four blocks from home, Jennie began to vomit. When we got her home, she violently vomited for seven hours. We had never seen her so sick. They did not have anti-nausea medication at that time so it was always the *luck of the draw* reaction. Sometimes, the chemo drug would make Jennie sick when she was not supposed to be nauseas. Other times, we would prepare for a long night of vomiting and nothing would happen. You just never knew.

As time progressed, it became more and more likely that the chemo was not going to make Jennie sick. We began to expect a normal day following her treatment. On one such trip home, Jennie and I stopped at Wendy's to have lunch. Jennie was enjoying her hamburger, French fries and Coke. We were having an enjoyable time together when suddenly, Jennie got a panicked look in her eyes and said, "Dad. Dad. I think I am going to thr..." I picked her up and ran like a jack rabbit to the exit. We had just gone through the outside door when Jennie let go. She threw up like a fountain smack dab in the middle of the main entrance door to Dave Thomas' fine hamburger establishment. With such a mess, I did exactly what any other red-blooded, courageous American father would do...I picked Jennie up, ran to the car and got out of there. I drove off as quickly as possible, hoping they would not catch my license number.

One of the positive outcomes of Jennie's illness was that she learned how to read at four. Just in case your child or grandchild also

began reading at four, just know that Jennie read exceptionally well. We were sitting in the doctor's office one day with a 12-year-old girl and her mother. The mother said, "Sweetheart, why don't you read to the little girl?" Jennie moved over by the 12-year-old and began to listen to her read. Occasionally, the older girl would get stuck on a word. Jennie would explain how to pronounce it. Jennie ended up reading the book to her new friend!

I suppose what I will remember about our experiences during those two years will be the Presence of our Loving God during each and every ordeal and the resilience of a little girl who never gave up physically, mentally, emotionally or spiritually during the whole awful ordeal.

This may sound strange, but if such a tragedy had to happen to us, it was good that Jennie was four. At four, she could understand what we were telling her, but had no preconceived notion about what cancer is. She knew she did not feel well, but she did not know she could die from the disease.

Jennie often had strep throat during the two years of treatment. Once the diagnosis was confirmed, it was an automatic five day stay. Keeping a four to six-year-old entertained in a hospital room is not easy. In 1982, there was a new invention just beginning to hit the market: Video Cassette Recorders. As a Nazarene, I was not sure if this was a good thing or another method through which Satan would use to introduce the Mark of the Beast. You did have to put the video tape in with your right hand!

A VCR was very expensive at that time and so were the recorded video tapes. Someone(s) had donated a VCR player to the hospital along with four video tapes. This fine collection included *The Incredible Shrinking Woman*, a very dark, creepy edition of *Pinnocchio*, *Winnie the Pooh and the Blustery Day* and the classic *Pete's Dragon*. After viewing it once, we rarely watched *Pinnocchio*, because it scared Jennie ... and me. *The Incredible Shrinking Woman* was cute, but got old pretty quick. That

left *Winnie the Pooh* and Pete's Dragon, *Elliott*. The second film was actually a major technical breakthrough when Disney combined animation with a *real-life* movie background.

All I know is that watching two movies over and over again during a two year period of time may be interesting for a child, but it will drive an adult crazy. Before the two years were over, Jennie could do both movies *verbatim* from beginning to end. Her presentation was *flawless and seamless*. She could start at any moment in either video and finish it. Watching the videos became a little more fun when Jennie would say the lines *ahead* of when they were spoken. Those two movies remained among Jennie's favorites.

Jennie was born with a strong will. She used every bit of it to triumph over a deadly disease. God used doctors and nurses and medicine to bring about her healing, but it was no less a miracle that she survived. She would laugh again, play again and sing again. There would be days when we would laugh about things that happened during that time period. However, none of our family would ever be the same again!