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An Entrepreneur and Energetic Spirit:

The house is quiet the dogs are sleeping, and the kids are playing in their rooms, waiting. When Kim comes home chaos erupts, my sister is home. The dogs start barking, children run from their rooms and the noise level intensifies as everyone talks at once, my sister being the loudest. Energy surrounded her until eight years ago, when she was diagnosed with Rheumatoid Arthritis.

My sister, Kim was the social butterfly of our family. Her teachers in grade school would send home notes to my mother telling her, how sweet Kim is, but was also a "chatty Cathy" in class.

Kim was that child in the neighborhood, you know the one that would organize the lemonade stand, the fun house tours in our garage and the occasional yard sale, selling her toys and handmade book marks to the neighbors. One particular yard sale, selling her newly purchased plastic cooktop stove with lights and sound to our neighbor next door, for a steal of a deal at two dollars. Our mother had to return the money and retrieve the stove back before dad found out. Thus the end to the occasional garage sales, but was the beginning of an entrepreneur in the making.

When Kim grew up she got married and started her family. With two young boys she decided to stay home instead of working and open her own daycare, caring for other children as well as home schooling her own. Kim however was

lonely for “adult conversation”; she began to also work in cosmetic sales bouncing between Mary Kay Cosmetics and Avon. Not one for sitting still, when she needed a change she became a Pamper Chef consultant, going to clients homes to cook and sell her products.

News of my sister’s third pregnancy was an unexpected surprise. As the months went by she noticed pain in her feet and hands. Kim told me, “Some days, they’d swell so much that it would pinch my nerves and my fingertips would tingle. I started losing my ability to grasp and hold on to things, even things that weren’t very heavy. I was becoming easily exhausted, and every few days I would run a low grade fever.” One morning waking up to find her hands looked crooked and bent, fearful of what was happening she made her an appointment with her primary doctor, who after see her, immediately referred her to a Rheumatoid Specialist.

Just four months into her pregnancy and Kim was diagnosed with Rheumatoid Arthritis. The news was devastating to our entire family, Kim said “when the doctor told me I would eventually end up in a wheelchair due to the disease, I broke down and cried.” Rheumatoid Arthritis is an autoimmune disease that causes the body immune system to mistakenly attack the tissue around the joints. Our immune systems antibodies are normally designed to attack invaders of our body. With an autoimmune disease the antibodies target our own tissue and organs. It is estimated 13 million people in the United States have the disease. Women are three times as likely to have the disease as men. (Arthritis Foundation)

For the remaining months of Kim’s pregnancy she would have to give up her multiple business plans. “When the pain went into my hand, it felt like every joint in

my wrists and fingers was on fire. Meanwhile, my feet were so swollen that I could only wear flip-flops. I sobbed through diaper changes. I wasn't able to snap or zip my kids clothes, and picking them up was almost more than I could bear. I was exhausted beyond what I felt was normal pregnancy exhaustion." She would become to rely on her family and neighbors for help. "I would have to have my husband roll me over in bed at night. In the morning he would have to get the kids and I dressed before he left for work. My neighbor Kayleen would come over if my son needed to tie his shoes, or zip up his zipper before going out." Our mother would arrive at Kim's home around nine in the morning assisting with daily task until her husband came home in the evening.

Kim told me, "I would sit on the couch and just cry, feeling so useless, I couldn't do anything!" Not having the use of her hands was the most difficult. "It was like one day having hands and the next day they are gone." Since the disease attacks different joints at different times, one day she would have use of her hands, but couldn't walk as her joints in her feet were inflamed, the next day she could walk but couldn't use her hands. She had to learn to adapt. The good days were the days she could try and get the baby room set up, run errands and cook dinner. The bad days Kim would have to sit on the recliner with heating pads and ice used to minimize the swelling in the joints.

After my niece was born, Kim decided she was not going to let this disease bring her spirit down; she wanted to be an active mother for her children. She again started her daycare business at home. When her son needed a basketball coach to be able to have a team for the season, Kim, who has never played

basketball before, volunteered. When a Cub Scout leader was needed, again she volunteered. Still staying busy, she would continue to have joint pain. She knows there will be good days and bad. Stress and diet triggers the bad days, and she is learning how to manage her disease without medication.

There is no cure for the disease and scientists are still trying to find out what is the cause. They say aggressive treatment at first will help minimize the damage to the joints, but the treatment and drugs have numerous side effects. (Edelson and Mitchell) Diet can also play an important role in the treatment of the disease. (Calbom) A diet rich in whole foods, vegetable and fiber, but low in meat and saturated fat can help relieve some of the symptoms. (O'Connor) Kim however is against using medication at this time due to the many side effects and is working with her diet to control the symptoms. Kim's husband Taylor is hopeful a cure will be found before his wife is totally disabled.

Kim told me she hopes her story can help people understand and not judge people with RA. Kim's entrepreneur and energetic spirit continues to drive her daily activities, "I am determined to always be doing something."

Works Cited

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