

Daughter was her source of strength, relatives say

Pfafftown woman, 29, dies two years after developing ALS

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Keri Brown Still found out about her ALS shortly after her wedding. It spread during her pregnancy with daughter Kellyn. (Photo Courtesy of Joanie Brown)

Keri Brown Still didn't live long enough to see her daughter, Kellyn, take her first step. She never heard Kellyn call her "Mama."

Still, 29, died Sunday morning at her home in Pfafftown, a little more than two years after she developed amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, or ALS.

Last September, the *Winston-Salem Journal* wrote about Still's battle against ALS, also known as Lou Gehrig's disease. The disease attacked her body in 2005, shortly after her wedding to Copeland Still. During her pregnancy with Kellyn, now 10 months old, the disease spread rapidly.

By the time Kellyn was 3 months old, Still's arms had become too weak to hold her.

But she organized Kellyn's life, even when she couldn't move or speak.

"She would tell us when the baby was hungry," said her mother, Joanie Brown. "She would tell us what to feed the baby. We let her choose what the baby wore." Copeland Still hooked up a video camera so his wife could watch Kellyn crawl down the hall and splash in her bath.

"She was in charge until the end," said Gwen Sellers of Greensboro, a friend of Still's since high school. "Keri was always in charge. Even though we couldn't understand her very well, she could blink 'yes' or 'no.'"

ALS is a fatal neurological disease that leaves intellect intact. It attacks the nerve cells that operate the muscles that control movement, including breathing and swallowing. Still's ability to move, speak, swallow and breathe had deteriorated steadily since September.

By the end of last week, Still's breathing had become more labored, despite the use of a breathing device called a BiPAP.

Sunday morning, her mother awoke at her bedside and found her daughter unusually lethargic. She and Still's father, Harold Brown, could barely rouse her, and her pulse had slowed. Then her breathing stopped. By the time paramedics arrived, Still was dead.

Still's friend Jennifer Lassiter started a Web site, www.helpkeri.com, not long after Still became ill.

Friends and strangers donated money through the site, and several fundraisers held this fall raised more. The efforts raised more than \$15,000. Lassiter said she intends to keep the site open.

"I know she would want us to continue supporting ALS research," she said.

Still's family and friends spoke about her fire, her strength and her dedication to her daughter. While she was still able to speak clearly, she made an audio tape for Kellyn - her voice interspersed with many of her favorite songs, everything from country tunes to classical pieces. She asked Sellers to buy 21 birthday cards, one to send to Kellyn each year as she grows up.

Even when Still struggled to breathe, her eyes lit up each time she saw her daughter, Sellers said. "I know that Kellyn really was her peace."

A memorial service for Still will be held at 11 a.m. Thursday in the new Worship Center at First Presbyterian Church on Cherry Street. A reception in the old fellowship hall will follow the service.

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