



POWER *for* G

April 21, 2024 I Can

A Life-Giving  
Message  
Rooted in Loss



# Navigating Grief with Kindness

BY DANNY SUMMERS

One of Kristi Thornton's lifelong dreams was to run a marathon. She trained for months and was a week away from competing in the Houston Marathon in January 2018 when her life changed.

Her younger brother and best friend, Caleb, died in a car accident at the age of 21.

Kristi decided not to run the marathon and looked for a way to honor Caleb. She immediately

contacted friends and asked 26 of them—representing the miles in a marathon—to perform random acts of kindness.

“Instead of me running 26 miles, why not get 26 people to do random act of kindness?” Kristi says. “That 26 turned into hundreds. And not just people from Texas, but from all over the country. It warmed my heart.”

The acts of kindness included Kristi's sister paying for somebody's groceries. Other's paid for people's



gasoline or coffee at Starbucks. Kristi paid for the parking fees for competitors in the Houston Marathon. By doing so she was able to share a little bit of her story.

Kristi's efforts did not end with that first campaign. She eventually started a scholarship fund in Caleb's name and today 26forCALEB is a non-profit organization.

A year after Caleb's death, Kristi finally competed in her one and only marathon and thought of her brother every step of the way.

Many people lose loved ones unexpectedly. The accompanying pain and heartache can be unbearable.

Kristi learned of her brother's death while checking out the local news the morning of January 3 on the Internet. She ran across a story where two local people died in a car accident in the area of where her brother had been when she last communicated with him the night before.

"I saw a vehicle with the story that looked familiar and then I started looking at the time the accident occurred," Kristi recalls. "I looked at the time I was texting my brother and called the police department."

Kristi told the officer on the other end of the line that she was looking for information on who was in the accident the previous night. Kristi described her brother and her brother's friend. A police officer checked into the accident and informed Kristi the two victims had not been identified. The officer added that he would do a little digging and get back to her shortly. He called her



**Caleb lost his life in an automobile accident in 2018. His sister, Kristi, started a non-profit in his name that helps spread love and kindness**

back 10 minutes later and instructed Kristi to call the medical examiner's office.

"I still didn't know what all of this meant," she says. "I thought it was normal protocol.

"When I called the medical examiner's office a woman told me my brother and his friend were there. I was in shock."

At that point, Kristi was the only person in her family who was aware of the terrible situation.

"I had to call my dad and tell him," Kristi says. "From there, I had to call my siblings.

"My dad asked me not to call my mom—he would go to her office at work and tell her. When he walked into her office she was getting off the phone and had just gotten the news."

After calling her father and



**Kristi Thornton started a non-profit in honor of her late brother after he died in a car crash in January 2018**

siblings with the news, Kristi dropped to her knees.

“I begged God, “This can’t be it,” Kristi recalls. “Please. Please. Please. Not him.”

She adds, “Right then and there I knew I had a decision to make: to hate God or cling to Him. I chose to cling. I knew that was the only way I was going to get through what I was about to go through.”

Kristi was eventually informed of the circumstances behind the car crash.

“Alcohol, speed and blowing through a red light create the perfect storm, and unfortunately it cost my brother and his friend their lives,” Kristi says. “You never think something like this will happen to anyone in your family. Until it happens. And when it does you’re not prepared.”

Kristi had a difficult time processing her grief, so she joined a GriefShare group almost immediately.

“It helped me navigate things,” Kristi says. “Grief is a very interesting thing. For the first year and a half I woke up daily facing the new reality that he’s not here anymore. I had moments when it hit me in the face like a wave. But I had to keep moving.”

Prayer kept Kristi moving. She found that talking to God about everything she was experiencing helped her feel closer to God—and closer to Caleb, too.

And while Kristi’s parents and sister found it difficult to talk about openly about the tragedy, sharing her story with others helped Kristi process her grief.

Within months after Caleb’s



death, Kristi's former high school principal asked her to speak to students on the day of the school's prom. She accepted the invitation, even though she had no public speaking experience.

"Six months before my brother died, I had volunteered to help Houston families impacted by Hurricane Harvey. I learned from that experience the healing power of helping others," Kristi says, adding that after her brother died, helping others through speaking and encouraging acts of kindness became foundational to her own healing.

Over the years, Kristi has spoken hundreds of times to young adults who are on the verge of venturing off to college and the work world. Often speaking on behalf of Shattered Lives/Shattered Dreams, she addresses students at assemblies, events prior to proms, and at graduations. She also addresses national organizations outside of school systems.

The \$2600 college scholarship in her brother's name is awarded annually to a high school student who writes an essay sharing about ways they have impacted their community or how their community has impacted them.

"The stories that I hear are absolutely life changing," Kristi says.

One scholarship winner was a girl who shared how she had lost her parents and siblings in a car accident and how her community rallied around her and picked her up as she pushed through to graduate.

Kristi says that many students, after hearing her speak, share with

her how they went home and made it a point to tell their family how much they love them and how much they mean to them.

"Relationships are impacted as students realize how precious and short life really is," Kristi says. "I think my family's story opens their eyes to the importance of loving each other and being kind and how beautiful the relationships with their siblings can really be."

Kristi still feels the pain of the loss of her brother each time she speaks. But the daily grief is not as heavy.

"Caleb is always on my mind," she admits. "At the same time, I am living life and doing what I've got to do."


She adds, "My faith in God has really carried me through. I know that when it's my time to go, I'll be reunited with Caleb. Until then, I will continue reminding people to spread love and kindness." 



PHOTO COURTESY OF 26FORCALEB

**26forCALEB is an non-profit that sponsors a 5K run among other events to spread love and random acts of kindness**



by MARLO SCHALESKY

## I Can Ride!

**H**e comes wheeling down the dirt path to the barn, an 18-year-old in a wheelchair that bumps over dirt and gravel. His legs are weak, barely functional, his arms stiff. You wouldn't think he came to ride a horse at my ranch. But he did.

He grins, a big smile that seems to have a light of its own, and he calls out to me. "Hi Marlo, I'm here!"

I wave. "Lewis! I've been waiting for you."

He rumbles up to the barn and I laugh. "You got a new haircut. I love it!"

"I got a new haircut." He rubs his head and smiles some more. "Where's Smokey? He's my best friend. I brought him cookies." He pats the sack on his lap with a bent hand.

I glance over my shoulder. "Beanie, can you get Smokey out of his stall?"

My youngest daughter grabs a halter and lead rope and soon leads Smokey out of the barn to the hitching post.

Lewis wheels closer. "I want to see you saddle him."



BOOSICH/ISTOCK / GETTY IMAGES PLUS

I chuckle. "First, we'll brush him and clean his hooves."

"Then I'll ride!"

"Yes!"

Beanie and I brush the horse, saddle him, and lead him to the special mounting platform that we use for Lewis. Then, Beanie holds Smokey still while my husband and Lewis' mom lift Lewis from his chair. My son, Jayden, stands by the mounting block ready to help. I stand on the other side of Smokey waiting to carefully pull Lewis's leg over the horse's back when it's time.

With everyone's support, Lewis slowly ascends the steps to the top of the mounting platform. Then he shuffles closer to Smokey. They lift his leg over. I grab it and help him to sit.

It takes a moment, but he gets comfortable, then grips the saddle horn. I nod to Beanie, and we're off.

Smokey takes careful steps around the path, Beanie leading him, and Jayden and I on either side

**Publisher:** Ed Stucky   **Managing Editor:** Karen Scalf Bouchard   **Designer:** Susan Murdock

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Volume 83, Number 3, March | April | May 2024

making sure Lewis balances.

He rides, we chat, and laugh, and enjoy the time together. And the rhythm of the horse's movements helps Lewis's muscles to relax and grow stronger. The time together makes all of us grow stronger and happier.

We love Lewis. We love the time we spend helping him to ride. Why? Because he's a project? Never! Because he's a friend.

I'm reminded of the story from Mark 2 and Luke 5 where friends help a paralytic man to get to Jesus for healing. Mark 2:4 (NIV) describes it this way: "Since they could not get him to Jesus because of the crowd, they made an opening in the roof above Jesus by digging through it and then lowered the mat the man was lying on." And the man was healed.

So often, when I read this story I focus on the man on the mat—what it was like to be carried, to be lowered, to see Jesus, to be healed. How amazing that must have been! But since being with Lewis, I now sometimes think about the friends. I can just imagine their faces as they peered down through the hole in the roof to see Jesus heal their

friend. I can imagine their joy, their wonder, their rejoicing together. Jesus could have healed the man from a distance, like He did in other cases, without the need for friends to tear holes in roofs. But He didn't. He allowed the friends to be a part of a miracle.

He allows me, allows us, to be the same. For our joy.

It's not a burden, but a delight, to walk beside Lewis as he rides Smokey. It's a pleasure and a privilege to hear Lewis proclaim, "Smokey is my best friend!" and hear him talk about his love of Christmas songs, his excitement over his brother's successes, and how he's going swimming later that day.

God allows us to be a part of His work. He gifts us with the opportunity to tear holes in roofs so others can see Jesus. It may not be easy, it may take a whole group of us, but together, we can walk alongside others as God works miracles in their lives, and in ours.

**Marlo Schalesky**

*is the author of several acclaimed novels.  
Find out more about her and her books  
at [www.VividGod.com](http://www.VividGod.com)*

## DAILY BIBLE READINGS

SUNDAY	<input type="checkbox"/>	Luke 12
MONDAY	<input type="checkbox"/>	Luke 13–14
TUESDAY	<input type="checkbox"/>	Luke 15
WEDNESDAY	<input type="checkbox"/>	Luke 16–17
THURSDAY	<input type="checkbox"/>	Luke 18–19
FRIDAY	<input type="checkbox"/>	Luke 20–21
SATURDAY	<input type="checkbox"/>	Luke 22–23



# JESUS: OUR COMFORT DURING DIFFICULT TIMES

Charles Spurgeon

CHRISTIAN  
CLASSICS



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*“In the world you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world.” – John 16:33 (NKJV)*



**D**uring all times when your spirit is downcast and discouraged, hurry to the Lord Jesus Christ.

Whenever the cares of this life burden you, and your way seems hard for your weary feet, hurry to your Father in heaven. There may be other sources of consolation, but they will not at all times restore you—and certainly not

with as much power and assurance.

In God, however, there dwells such a fullness of comfort that whether it be summer or winter, the streams of reassurance are always flowing. In your high state or in your low state, and from whatever source your trouble may arise, you can turn at once to Him. When you do so, you will find that He strengthens the hands that hang down and fortifies the feeble knees.

**Charles Spurgeon (June 19, 1834 – January 31, 1892)** was a British Particular Baptist preacher who remains highly influential among Christians of different denominations, among whom he is still known as the “Prince of Preachers.” From *The Best of Charles Spurgeon: 120 Daily Devotions to Nurture your Spirit and Refresh Your Soul*. © 2005 Honor Books. Used by permission.