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Growing up, Kelly Corrigan received the same gift day after day. The present came from her father, George Corrigan, and although simple and unadorned, its value was immeasurable.

"Whenever I'd say, 'Hey, Dad,' my father would turn and look at me with a certain expression that said, 'I can't wait to hear what you're going to say next,'" recalls Corrigan, Epsilon Psi/Richmond. "I always knew that he loved me, but this particular look also told me that he *liked* me and, at that moment, he chose and preferred me."

Decades later, his ready smile and eager eyes conveyed an equally uplifting message. When George Corrigan's daughter was diagnosed with Stage III breast cancer in August 2004 at age 36, his expression told her, "I've always known you're a very special girl . . . and you can do this."

Throughout the course of surgery, chemotherapy, radiation, and recovery, Corrigan culled her father's words—along with enormous outpourings from family and friends—into "expressions" that likewise have lifted thousands of women. Her two websites, KellyCorrigan.com and CircusofCancer.org, link visitors to personal journals and photos that chronicle her cancer experience, as well as insights on how to support a loved one through diagnosis and treatment. She's also authored a book, *The Middle Place*, which was published in January 2008 and landed on the *New York Times* bestseller list in March. (See sidebar.)

The book's muse, says Corrigan, was "Big George" who, months after his daughter's diagnosis, learned he had late-stage bladder cancer.

"The idea that, someday, I wouldn't be able to find my Dad in this world was truly new to me," Corrigan says, "and that feeling triggered the book."

"I just started writing stories from my childhood—both as a way to memorialize my Dad and to memorialize him."

Daughter, Sister, Wife

Corrigan's earliest memories tie to her parents' first and only home on Wooded Lane, located in the Philadelphia suburbs, where she grew up with two older brothers, GT and Booker. Her father's longtime, success-

Celebrating the Center

as mother,
daughter,
wife, columnist,
best-selling author,
& cancer survivor,
kelly corrigan
maximizes
"mid" life



By Jan Schmitz Mathew, Δ/Illinois

ful career selling ad space for women's magazines ranked second to his two true passions—family and lacrosse. George Corrigan was an all-American lacrosse player in 1953 and 1954 and has helped coach the sport at his daughter's alma mater, Radnor High School, since his retirement.

Like their father, Corrigan's brothers were skilled athletes. And although the "lacrosse gene" didn't pass from father to daughter, Corrigan credits the sport with leading her to the University of Richmond—where she earned a bache-

lor of science degree in English and Speech Communication—and, ultimately, to Theta.

"I often traveled to Virginia to watch my brothers' matches, and fell in love with that part of the country," says Corrigan, who now lives in Piedmont, Calif., just north of San Francisco. As a sophomore, she also became a charter member of the University of Richmond's Epsilon Psi chapter, founded in 1987. Through Theta, she cultivated "... a belief in the power of women and women's friendships."

"I was the chapter's first social chairman, and that was a perfect position for me," recalls Corrigan, who also served as vice-president of pledge education her senior year.

After graduation, Corrigan continued to follow familial footsteps which, this time, led overseas. "My older brother, GT, had traveled to Australia and, when I saw his pictures of Fiji and New Zealand, I knew I wanted to see the same places," she says.

Corrigan worked two years for United Way; bankrolled \$2,800, and spent the next thirteen months working and traveling throughout Australia and Nepal with Theta sister Tracy Tuttle.

"The experience totally cracked open my mindset," Corrigan recalls. "I went from thinking my choices were whether to live in Baltimore or Philadelphia to considering whether or not I should continue to be an American.

"I could talk all I wanted about how we're just a tiny part of a huge world but, until I saw it for myself, the words were completely empty."

Returning to her position with United Way, which she held for a total of ten years, was broadening as well. "United Way completely solidified my world view," Corrigan says. "Once you've worked in that world, and on behalf of under-served populations, it's never lost on you.

"At the same time, (the experience) has created a lot of internal conflict," she adds. "I'm constantly questioning how much (my husband) Ed and I should give away, or whether we're showing our daughters enough of the world. As a couple, we vacillate between being very strategic about our contributions and simply writing checks.

"When you internalize the fact that out of six billion people in the world, you're in the very top, it creates a lot of questions."

Mother, Cancer Survivor, Advocate, Author

Questions of an entirely different nature first punctuated Corrigan's life on August 2, 2004—the day she discovered, quite by accident, a large lump in her left breast. She recounts in *The Middle Place*: "When Edward is away, I often find that I've been talked

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into the tub so the girls can pour too much shampoo on my bushy brown hair. This night is such a night, except on this night, as I brush past my breast to get some soap out of my eyes, I think I feel something hard, just there, under the skin. I touch it once, pressing lightly with the open palm of my hand, and then, after a flash of shock passes through me, I force my full attention to bathing the girls.

"As I dry myself off, I know I have to touch it again, just to be sure I'm wrong. But I'm not and so I start moving at a manic pace, directing the girls in that weird, strained way mothers do in movies when they find out a bomb is about to go off in their basement, right below where their children are blithely playing with their Legos."

By the end of that week, a mammogram and biopsy gave unsettling answers: The seven-centimeter mass was cancerous. Corrigan, mother of Georgia, then three years old, and Claire, then eighteen months, faced six months of chemotherapy, surgery, radiation, and hormone therapy.

Corrigan documented the regimen through words and photos and, as treatment progressed, so did her desire to share with others. "I was lying in bed and, all of the sudden, I opened my eyes and knew exactly what I'd do with all my photos—put them where they'd be available to everyone," she recalls. "The web is so egalitarian and, if a site is useful, people will find it." Corrigan's website, www.circusofcancer.org, currently draws about 6,000 new visitors every month, and feedback is overwhelming.

"People with cancer love the name, because the experience is like a cir-

cus," she says, referring to the website's moniker. "There's a performance element, a life-and-death element, and a strange land element. Things look different from outside the 'big top,' but once you step inside, everything changes.

"These analogies ring true with cancer patients."

The Circusofcancer website also imparts a key message from Corrigan: Get involved in others' crises. Web-page verbiage, which describes it as a "... how-to site to help you step right up when your friend has breast cancer," makes her mission crystal clear.

"What changed (my experience) from terrifying and lonely to a warm, tender, and memorable time were friends and family," says Corrigan. "While I really believe in medications, and witnessed some amazing medical feats, the qualitative difference is that I look back on those six months as a lovely time—a time that, frankly, I'd rather have had than not.

"It was great to see such a compassionate side to people. I had only been married four years and, to see my marriage go through this proved that I married a very good guy. And that's a nice thing to know."

Corrigan next weaved marriage, motherhood, childhood, friendships, and her cancer experience into *The Middle Place*, a book she began writing toward the end of treatment, and which was launched by her father's bladder cancer diagnosis in November 2004.

"Unlike the website, I didn't have an agenda with the book," she recalls. "I just started writing stories from my childhood and, ultimately, hoped to have something I could hand to my dad and be proud of."

Others, however, had grander plans. Through a series of connections, starting with her sister-in-law, Phoebe, Corrigan's stories landed with a publishing agent who expressed strong interest.

"After that, I made a rule that I had to sit in a chair and write for four hours, three times a week," says Corrigan, who also holds a masters degree in English Literature from San Francisco State University. "I'd drop the girls at preschool, go to a nearby café, and write. I realized that, not only did I like the feeling of 'having written,' I also



Kelly Corrigan calls that sliver of time when parenthood and childhood overlap as the "... richest, most insightful period of her life."

And if her best-selling book is any indication, I would add humorous, honest, inspiring, and liberating to her list of descriptors.

The Middle Place is Corrigan's story about growing up the first time, as George Corrigan's only daughter, and the second time, as a young wife and mother battling breast cancer and dealing with her father's bladder cancer diagnosis. Chapters shift from

girlhood to adulthood, and are packed with anecdotes that can draw laughter and tears in the span of a page.

And although many memories and realities are uniquely hers, there's a universality to this book as well—something for every reader of Corrigan's approximate vintage to own. I, for instance, could picture myself in her prom dress: "The winner was a Gunne-

Sax knockoff that borrowed some of its style from the Puritans and the rest from the Victorians." Descriptions of her relatively no-nonsense mother rang true as well: "...when my mom took a stand, which she often did, I don't remember her ever backing down. Her fortitude looks like love to me now, but at the time, I was sure my mom was trying to ruin my life."

At the heart of every chapter is George "Greenie" Corrigan. His humor, easy acceptance, and genuine delight in God's world and those who inhabited it, inspired his daughter's interpretation: "I could only deduce that the world was a safe place. In fact, according to my dad, the world was beyond safe—it had a sense of humor, it knew your name, it was waiting for you."

The Middle Place speaks to every woman who grew up as "daddy's girl," who now claims roles as wife, mother, sister, or daughter; and who relishes the small moments, as well as the global insights, that spring from memories and intersecting personas.

And while you can easily devour it in a single read, as I did, *The Middle Place* is also a beautifully written treat you'll want to re-visit in portions. Either way, by the last page you'll feel you've made two great new friends: George and Kelly Corrigan.

You can bet you'll find yourself rooting for them as well.

Reviewed by Jan Mathew

liked writing. I found it interesting, challenging, and filled with variety."

The process—from concept to publication—spanned two years, and response to *The Middle Place* exceeded Corrigan's wildest expectations. "I was afraid that people who had actually lost a parent would find this book unbearable," she says. "But, interestingly, the nicest notes came from those who had suffered such a loss."

Equally gratifying were responses from scores of readers who counted "Big George" among their best buddies. "People who knew my dad decades ago wrote to tell me that I had really captured him in the book," Corrigan says. "I wasn't exaggerating—he's really all that, which made me feel great."

In the book's acknowledgements, she describes the moment that made every step worthwhile:

"After you have done all this, show the book to your parents. Your dad will say, 'Lovey, I'm blown away,' as he pats his heart, and your mom will make you cry by saying, 'Kelly, it's beautiful.'"

From "Middle" to the Next Place . . .

In the years since her cancer diagno-

sis, Corrigan has lived simultaneously in—and out—of the "big tent."

On the one hand, she still writes a regular column for the daily newspapers published by The Bay Area News Group, and describes herself as "a worrier."

"My fear of cancer waxes and wanes," she admits. "My prognosis is that I have a fifteen percent chance of recurrence in the first five years, and I'm three years into it. So in 2010, I'll feel like I can finally exhale."

But, on the flip side, life often resembles a three-ring circus. Between October 2005 and January 2008, she's appeared three times on NBC's *Today Show*—once with her father—holding her own with Katie Couric, Ann Curry, and Meredith Vieira. And in addition to San Francisco-area newspapers, her articles have appeared in publications including, *O, The Oprah Magazine*; *Glamour*; and *Good Housekeeping*. Among other links, her newest website, KellyCorrigan.com, posts an ambitious schedule of fund-raising events and book readings.

"I love the speaking engagements, because they give me an opportunity to be useful," she says. "I'd like to do even more."

Corrigan also has a new project

underway—a collection of essays on faith. "I'm fascinated by faith and am focusing on stories my parents told me, as well as stories I'll share with my daughters," Corrigan says. "For example, I attended my first Bar Mitzvah as a teenager and decided, for all the wrong reasons, that I wanted to become Jewish."

The best stories, however, continue to unfold in front of her eyes. She calls her father every day, and returns to Wooded Lane as often as possible to visit. And her daughters continually charm her with glimpses of the world through the eyes of a five- and six-year-old.

"I watched them at play the other day, and they were trying to catch fairies. They made little houses with twigs and cut up a slice of bread in small pieces and wrapped them in cellophane to make fairy bread."

Hopefully, she says, the look on her face told Georgia and Claire that she couldn't wait to see what they'd do next.

"I remind myself that these are the moments that count," Corrigan says. "It's a matter of balancing the mundane with constant expressions that say, 'I like you.'"

"I try to emulate my dad. He's a gregarious, committed, patient, and enthusiastic man—those are his gifts." ♦