

19 TRUE STORIES OF FINDING HOPE THROUGH
GRIEF AND MENTAL HEALTH JOURNEYS

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Julianne Williams

Along with **18 Inspiring Women Authors**

ANSWERING THE CALL

By Kat O'Sullivan

God's ways are rarely our ways, and He often has an uncanny sense of humor. Never in my wildest imagination could I have anticipated how answering an unexpected call back in 1988 would turn into my 'calling' and my lifeline.

It's 9:00 pm. I hear an anxious voice, "Kat, this is Terri. I just found out my two-year-old Mikey has a malignant brain tumor. They're operating in the morning, and I'm scared. Can you come to the hospital?"

I'd like to say that my immediate thought is, "Of course," but I barely know Terri. Why is she calling ME? It's as if time stands still, and I'm sure it's only seconds, yet it feels like hours. An internal battle rages as fear begins to take hold. Everything within me screams, "NO!" At the same time, there is a still, small voice urging me to go.

The next thing I know, I'm making the 20-minute trek through the dark and somewhat ominous canyon between my home and the hospital—a metaphor for what I'm about to experience.

Imagine, I step off the elevator and enter the "twilight zone" . . . the pediatric oncology unit. Everything is totally foreign. I'm second-guessing my decision and getting ready to flee when Terri throws her arms around me. Sobbing, she says, "I don't know how to do this. I'm five months pregnant. My husband and I need to keep working, or we'll lose our health insurance." My emotions are all over the place, and this isn't even my child.

It feels like Terri's dilemma is becoming mine as well. As I drive home, I'm bargaining with God about my role in this unfolding drama. God, you know how much I hate hospitals and doctors. Why me? Why now? You know the struggles I'm facing. This feels like more than I can handle. I'm pulling into our driveway, questioning whether I can be courageous enough to answer the 'call' when a surprising peace washes over me.

The next morning, I stepped off that same hospital elevator. Kids are walking around with IV poles as if it's normal. It's surreal. I find Mikey's room and hear myself saying. "Hey Terri, I'm working on the weekends. What if I sit with Mikey during the day while my kids are at school?" I think, did I just say that? Terri's response is one of overwhelming gratitude.

For the next six weeks, I feel like I'm living in an alternate universe. Young children are walking around the unit, IV pole in hand. It's as if they don't know that their 'normal' isn't normal at all! It's amazing how they find joy in the littlest thing when death is at their doorstep for many.

I can't help but notice a small gaggle of girls, five and six-year-olds, hanging out together. They hate being mistaken for boys. Their bald heads and unshapely figures betray them. Girly stuff to the rescue! I bring in make-up, headbands, and jewelry for them to play with . . . anything that will help them look and feel like the beautiful girls they are.

I am particularly intrigued by one girl who always seems to be on the periphery and has no visitors. I learned that Vanessa's parents abandoned her four months earlier—just before Christmas. Unthinkable! She had been diagnosed with a life-threatening and aggressive brain tumor like Mikey's. Vanessa had been going through surgery and gruesome high-dose chemo and radiation for over four months already, with no family support. Her courage inspires me to let go of my fear and allows courage to take hold.

I wonder, am I here for Mikey or Vanessa, or in some way for me?

While I didn't realize it at the time, Vanessa and I were living parallel lives of desperation and, over time, restoration. It changed everything for me, Vanessa, and everyone on our path.

I make time to connect with Vanessa.

Then comes the fateful night. Vanessa's recent chemo is taking a deadly toll. The nurses call her family, but they never show up. I decide to stay. I hold her hand through the night, determined

that this precious child will not die alone. Miraculously she survives. Somehow, I know her life and mine will never be the same. We have an unbreakable bond.

A few days later, I asked the nurses if I could take her to the park or McDonald's to get her out of the hospital for a few hours. Their response? "That's impossible."

Three days later, Sandy, a social worker, approaches me and asks if I will take Vanessa. My immediate response is, "To the park?" knowing she really means take her home. The moment of truth: will I succumb to my fear or be courageous enough to trust this is meant to be? When I say, "Yes," Sandy shares it will probably only be for about three months, which is how long they expect her to live.

Everyone thinks I'm crazy.

You might be thinking the same thing.

A week later, I'm loading Vanessa into my van and maneuvering the twists and turns of the canyon, yet again wondering what the bleep I'm doing.

I'm facing a harsh reality. Everyone in my life thinks it's crazy, and they distance themselves from the potential loss. The only exception is a dear friend, Catt. "Listen, Kat, when Vanessa's time on earth is over, you'll have the privilege of ushering her back into the arms of God." That gives me a whole new perspective and the courage to face what lies ahead.

While saying "Yes!" to Vanessa seems crazy, it feels more and more like a "calling." Little do I know it will be my saving grace, literally. After bringing her home, I experience the best of times and the worst of times. I am stretched to my breaking point. I'm giving out of an empty, bone-dry cup.

Being at the hospital is a bizarre reprieve from troubles on the home front, where I'm feeling utterly invisible. I have spent my life trying to please everyone. In hindsight, I wonder if taking

Vanessa is my way of proving I am somehow worthy of love and approval. My people-pleasing is a useless pursuit with devastating results in my marriage. I realize it is a perfect marriage . . . of dysfunction, that is.

I find myself in my therapist's office with a purse full of enough pills to end the pain permanently. Randy asks me a question that shakes me to my core, "Kat, do you see any parallels between Vanessa's life and your own? Abandoned, no support . . . dying?" He goes on, "While others may have abandoned you throughout your life, can you see that you are contemplating the ultimate abandonment . . . of yourself?" Ouch! He is right.

I have a choice: admit myself, or be admitted. I wonder if God knew that it would take all of this for me to finally get the support I will need for what is still to come.

I affectionately call my time in the hospital my forty days in the desert. It is a safe place, and I feel seen and heard for the first time. It renews my faith and my belief that I am worthy of being loved and that I can experience grace for abandoning myself for all those years. I can also extend grace to others who abandoned me, realizing they were doing the best they could. I leave with the clarity, commitment, and courage I need to end that perfect marriage of dysfunction. I realize that as a single mom, I have the opportunity to reparent myself by parenting Vanessa how I always wanted to be parented. Maybe it would even help me parent my son, Jeff.

Amazing what happens when I let go of the fear that's been holding me captive.

Fast forward, I'm finishing dinner in a restaurant that exudes romance. Imagine the most beautiful bouquet of flowers coming into the room. I know they couldn't be for me, but I wish they were. Then I feel everyone's eyes on me as the bouquet comes closer and closer. Then I see a baseball seated like a nest in the middle of a sea of red roses. Only Michael, the ultimate romantic, could dream up a moment like this.

My first encounter with Michael is totally unexpected. I'm in my office going through the mail, and I slit an envelope open and pull out a handwritten letter. "Dear Kat, I've heard you several

times on the radio talking about your organization's mission and would love to help." He goes on to share he's an architect doing his best to juggle the demands of his work with the challenges of single parenting his two kids. He lives in South Pasadena, which seems worlds away from Hemet. I'm intrigued and concoct a plan for him to come out and advise us on renovating one of our facilities.

I couldn't wait. We seem to have so much in common. I am hopeful this will end my losing streak on the dating front. The day comes for us to meet. Michael couldn't have been more gracious, but the chemistry wasn't there. He is the nicest guy ever, but I realize he isn't my type. I never expect anything more to come of it. But God has other plans.

Three months later, the phone rings. "Hi, this is Michael. I have no idea why I'm calling, but Friday night, I got this strange knock, knock from God to call you. I tried to ignore it, but He kept knocking. What's going on in your life?" I realize I have nothing to lose, and I unload on him. "Friday night, I was in a horrible accident that totaled my car. While sirens blared during my ambulance ride to the ER, I realized I had no one to call when something like this happened. Even the support group I go to is a bust. All they want to do is whine and complain. None of them want to play ball. And last week, Vanessa's social worker called to say there's an issue with the adoption now that I'm a single mom. What the bleep! Vanessa's parents abandoned her when she was diagnosed with a terminal brain tumor. Who else would take her? Let's face it, me being a single parent is the least of their worries. Then there's my son, Jeff. He's totally out of control. I've tried everything. I have no idea what else to do!"

I finally take a breath. Instead of an abrupt click on the other end of the line, I hear, "Wow, now I know why I called. Can I call you tomorrow?" Yeah, like that will ever happen. But it does. The next night and every night for a year, he called me. It is literally a lifeline and turns into a deep friendship.

After a year of late-night calls, Michael shows up at my door with a Golden Retriever and a bag of groceries. He says, "Relax and let me take over." What happens next is like something from one of those heartwarming Hallmark movies. Michael and Vanessa are on the kitchen floor, and the Golden is cuddling with Vanessa. Michael is pulling each ingredient out of the bag like

magic. And it is. I am mesmerized as he shows Vanessa how to put it all together to make spaghetti. Her angelic smile permeates the room, reminding me how she stole my heart a year and a half earlier. I see Michael through new eyes, wondering if—okay, secretly hoping—this will lead to something more. Maybe the fact that he’s not my type is a good thing. After all, my type didn’t work out so well before.

Then it happens—an unexpected meltdown kiss that changes everything. In an instant, we go from friends to much more.

Now back to the bouquet and the baseball. I carefully remove the baseball and realize it’s hinged. I open it up and see Michael has scooped out one side and placed a ring in it. The other side has a note that harkens back to something I said in that awful rant. It says, “Do you want to play ball?” How could I say no? It’s been twenty-nine glorious years full of romance and amazing adventures with an incredible husband who became a wonderful father to Vanessa.

Saying “Yes” to Vanessa, and then Michael transforms my life and fills it with love, joy, laughter, and yes, some sadness.

Vanessa was an angel in our midst. Along her journey, she reflected God’s enduring love, compassion, and grace in a way only she could.

In the aftermath of her cancer and related treatments, Vanessa has many cognitive, emotional, and physical challenges, but she never lets them get in the way of a life well-lived. Vanessa volunteered at the Pasadena Humane Society for over twelve years, caring for unadoptable animals. She worked part-time at PetSmart for ten years until her health declined to the point where she forgot to close the cages. Rats ran rampant, putting an end to that chapter.

While people would say I am her angel, she was my angel . . . a true gift from God. She taught me so much about what it means to be alive, to live in the moment with joy and hope, and to embrace gratitude even in unthinkable circumstances.

The doctor's prognosis of three months turns into twenty-six years. Twenty-six years of learning to be her mom and an endless advocate, ensuring she never becomes invisible to the doctors, educators, and other providers who help me care for her. I'm sure there were moments when they thought I was the mother from hell and, at other times, heaven-sent.

Vanessa's health continued to decline unmercifully, and I felt helpless. For the next five years, I struggle with anticipatory grief. Depression wove itself in and out of my denial, anger, and bargaining. Lots of bargaining. Acceptance felt elusive until Valentine's Day in 2015.

Twenty-six years after her diagnosis, Vanessa joins many of her friends for a tea party in heaven, including Mikey, who passed away just months after I took Vanessa home. The timing of her passing feels providential. Valentine's is the ultimate day of love. Her work on earth is done, and we have the privilege of ushering her back into the arms of God.

And there it is, the answer to "Why me, God?"

Vanessa is finally at peace. While she isn't cured, she is healed, and so am I.

I often wonder, what if I hadn't answered that unexpected 'call?'

**TAKE ON THE WORLD WITH A HEART FULL
OF HOPE AND A SPIRIT OF RESILIENCE.**



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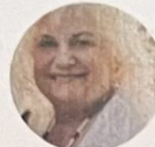
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MONICA



STACY



SHARON



JANET



HELEN

You Can, You Will is written for people whose lives have been affected by mental health, grief, and difficulty. Nineteen sacred stories of overcoming experiences that could have destroyed the very lives of these women are shared to provide inspiration that life can and does change, that there are solutions to every struggle, and wholeness and happiness can be found. After reading this book, the readers will have strategies to make the changes in their life for healing and joy.

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