

Highlands Ranch Herald

Two lives taken too soon

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Highlands Ranch resident Allison Atkinson Adams and her sister Whitney, lost their two siblings to Fanconi Anemia and now the family dedicates themselves to spread awareness and raise funds to help find a cure.

At the respective ages of 7 and 3, Kendall and Taylor Atkinson were destined to lives filled with blood transfusions, chemotherapy, pain and waiting for a bone marrow transplant. Kendall passed away at age 20, her brother was 18.

Fanconi Anemia is a genetic blood disease that usually results in bone marrow failure in childhood and is associated with a high rate of leukemia and various forms of cancer. Bone marrow is the spongy material that is found inside the bones, and in the marrow are cells called stem cells. These cells are in the very early stages of development and will eventually become white blood cells, red blood cells and platelets. White blood cells fight infection, and red blood cells carry oxygen.



The Atkinson family, from left, Taylor, Kenneth, Kendall, Whitney Atkinson Langlois, Jeanne, Scott Adams and Allison Atkinson Adams. Courtesy photo

Kendall and Taylor's bone marrow actually matched each others, so only one donor could be used for both of them. The family did not know anything about Kendall and Taylor's donor, only that they were very grateful for the chance to save their loved ones.

Kendall was a sophomore in college, when in 2004, increasing bouts of illness led her to make the difficult and courageous decision to leave college and proceed with a transplant in Minnesota.

"My sister Whitney and I drove out with my mom and Kendall to help set everything up for them," Allison remembered. "We threw Kendall a 'pink party' in her hospital room on transplant day."

After suffering incredibly from the chemotherapy drugs, Allison said even the doctors were surprised by how sick she was.

"Yet she never shed a tear," Allison said. "Until the day Whitney and I had to leave."

That was the last time the sisters saw Kendall awake, due to the chemotherapy that eventually "ravaged her body."

When Kendall was in a coma, photo albums and scrapbooks that had been made by her mother, Jeanne were opened. The family sat in the hospital room and reminisced about their sister, daughter and sister-in-law.

Allison had given Kendall a hard time about bringing all ten of the albums on the road trip to Minnesota, because there were so many. Allison said they were lucky to have them.

Kendall died just a few weeks after her transplant.

Kendall was described by her family as not wanting to be defined by her disease. Lacking the red blood cells

that a typical person would need to play competitive sports or to ski giant moguls, she played and skied anyway. Kendall was known to create fun, and had a spirit for adventure. She also loved her younger brother, Taylor, very much. In a school essay she wrote, "My brother Taylor is my favorite person in the whole world. I don't know what I would do without him."

In 2005, Taylor had his transplant in New York City.

"Taylor's transplant journey was different," Allison said.

The entire Atkinson family was there, as they were for Kendall's transplant. Another party was held in Taylor's pre-transplant celebration, this time a Star Wars theme.

Taylor reacted medically favorable during his month in the hospital for the transplant. The entire family spent Thanksgiving and Christmas together there, and embraced the times they could all be together.

One of the hardest parts of being away from Colorado for Taylor, was that he missed his friends. Taylor absolutely loved doing anything, everything and nothing with his friends. The torn, tattered and taped phonebook he used from elementary through high school tells the story of a kid who was born to connect with people.

While in New York, Taylor had restrictions on what he could do and where he could go, to ward off the chance of infections. Allison said she and her brother loved going to Central Park. He also wanted to see the Statue of Liberty, so a cousin hooked them up with a helicopter ride for his 18th birthday.

"He was in so much pain and it was really, really hard to watch him suffer so much," Allison said. "He suffered a long time."

While Taylor was in the hospital, Allison and her husband Scott, found out they were pregnant, and Taylor was so excited about becoming an uncle. He would brag to the nurses and let everyone know he was going to be an uncle. In February of 2006, Allison found out she was having a boy, and Taylor was the first person they called. Taylor died later that week. On July 8, 2006, Allison gave birth to her son, Carson Taylor Adams.

On Nov. 21, Allison and her husband Scott, who are committee members for The Brave Hearts Hoot 'N Holler Western Gala, and dedicated supporters of the Kendall and Taylor Atkinson Foundation, founded by Allison's parents Dr. Kenneth and Jeanne Atkinson in 2006, held an annual gala at the Hilton Garden Inn Denver Tech Center. Last year the foundation raised \$133,000, with 80 percent of the funds raised going for Fanconi Anemia research and 20 percent went to improving the lives of children and young adults living with adversity. A camp in Missouri called Camp Barnabas, for kids with life threatening illnesses and disabilities, will be a recipient for money raised. Taylor went to Camp Barnabas during summers, and "loved it". One cabin at the camp was built in memory of Taylor, and the Atkinson family hopes another cabin will be funded in memory of Kendall. The foundation has also provided scholarships for two campers each summer from Arapahoe High School to be able to attend Camp Barnabas.

Allison said losing her two siblings was incredibly heartbreaking, but what she and her family build with the foundation is a legacy to Kendall and Taylor.

"It is making a real difference, for that, Kendall and Taylor would both be so honored."

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