

Breathe Easy

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HOW TO CITE: Nelson EE. Breathe Easy.
Fam Med. 2023;55(7):494-495.
doi: [10.22454/FamMed.2023.989905](https://doi.org/10.22454/FamMed.2023.989905)

PUBLISHED: 5 July 2023

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BREATHE EASY

Twenty years ago, I proudly stood in my brand-new school uniform, my hair neatly tied back into a bun and enveloped by a disproportionately large butterfly backpack. It was my first day of kindergarten. Grinning from ear to ear, I could barely contain my excitement. Today was the first day of being a big kid... a new chapter of my life.

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After squirming into my seat, taking care to avoid the precariously placed bubble gum beneath my desk, I examined the box of 120 Crayola crayons that I received in my school supplies box. I had never seen such a large box of crayons in my life.

“That one is my favorite. Purple is my favorite.” A small, yet fiercely confident, voice exclaimed. “Well, aren’t you going to ask me WHY it’s my favorite?” she beckoned.

“Why is it your favorite?” I asked. Admittedly, I was a bit curious. I could tell this girl was different. She had a spark about her. A fierce passion radiated from deep within her chocolate brown eyes.

“Well, you see... I have cystic fibrosis. That means I have to take enzymes every day, inhale Tobramycin, and wear a vibratory-vest to *breathe easy*. Purple just so happens to be the color of cystic fibrosis. How cool is that? I have my own special color.”

I wasn’t quite sure what to say. I had never heard of cystic fibrosis, but she seemed vivacious and strong. I convinced myself that cystic fibrosis probably wasn’t a big deal and that she would likely be cured in no time.

What began as small talk blossomed into a beautiful, life-long friendship. Her name was Madison, Maddie for short. Over the next few years, Maddie and I became practically inseparable. From dance lessons to shared classes and slumber parties, we did everything together. Many nights we would stay up until the rising sun discussing our futures and our big plans to cure cystic fibrosis. Ambition and optimism burned in our hearts and forged the inseparable bond of true friendship. Maddie became the sister that I never had but always wanted.

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A haunting, deafening silence filled the room as my mother hung up the phone. A wave of shock engulfed her face. Maddie had been hospitalized. She likely would not make it through the night. Tears began to well in my eyes. How could this be happening? She was only 8 years old. Her life was just beginning. But she was a warrior. I knew in my heart that she would not give up without a fight.

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Against all odds, Maddie made it through the night. The following morning, my mother and I made our way to the hospital, purple roses in hand, to celebrate her miraculous recovery.

“Purple Roses!!! My favorite! Oh, you guys shouldn’t have.... I’m just fine. I promise!” Maddie’s confident voice quickly assuaged any inkling of lingering fear that I felt. She was going to be okay. She still had time to make more memories with her family and friends, time to achieve her dreams.

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Over the next few years, Maddie flourished both physically and academically. From captivating audiences with her pirouettes and *pas de bourrées* as she danced under the lights of the Grand Opera House to scoring a near-perfect score on her PSATs, Maddie refused to let her disease define or quell her dreams.

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A slew of white coats encircled Maddie’s hospital bed.

“I wish we had better news,” the doctor sighed in dismay. “The bug that you have is called *mycobacterium avium intracellulare*. Unfortunately, this bug is nasty, but you, Maddie, are a warrior. We are going to get you through this, just like we always do.” He patted her on the shoulder as if to provide the reassurance that his voice could not convey.

Hospital admission after hospital admission, Maddie became very well known on the pediatric floor and beloved by all with whom she had the opportunity to interact. While long treatments frequently meant even longer nights, Maddie didn’t mind one bit. She was grateful to be alive.

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“I can’t breathe,” Maddie cried out, gasping for breath between bouts of violent coughing spells.

“Maddie, honey, the pressure in your lungs is too high. We are running out of options. We must operate, but this procedure is very risky.”

“I know there are risks, but I want to live. I just have to live. There is so much more that I want to do. Please, just give me a chance! I want the surgery,” she begged.

And just like that, it was settled. Maddie would proceed with the surgery. She gave her mom and dad a quick kiss goodbye, closed her eyes, and slowly drifted off to sleep.

“I’m a warrior.”

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October 14, 2011 continues to plague my memory like a tormenting dream. Purple roses lined the altar and filled the mahogany casket. They were her favorite.

Paralysis consumed my limbs as I peered into her casket and saw her tiny, motionless chest. I began to plead to God, begging Him to fill her desiccated lungs with a breath of life. It was an impossibility, yet at that moment, I would have given my own life to make it a reality. How could someone so beautiful, intelligent, and kind-hearted be forced to fight a lifelong battle and not emerge victoriously? My best friend, my sister, was gone, but at last, she was breathing easy.

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It has been said that a person dies two deaths, one when the heart beats no more and another when that person’s name is uttered for the last time. Maddie’s name and inspiration will not die; her name will forever carry her spirit. Her courage and passion for life have ultimately inspired me to pursue a career in medicine and will forever serve as the spirit of my ambition and the guidance of my heart.