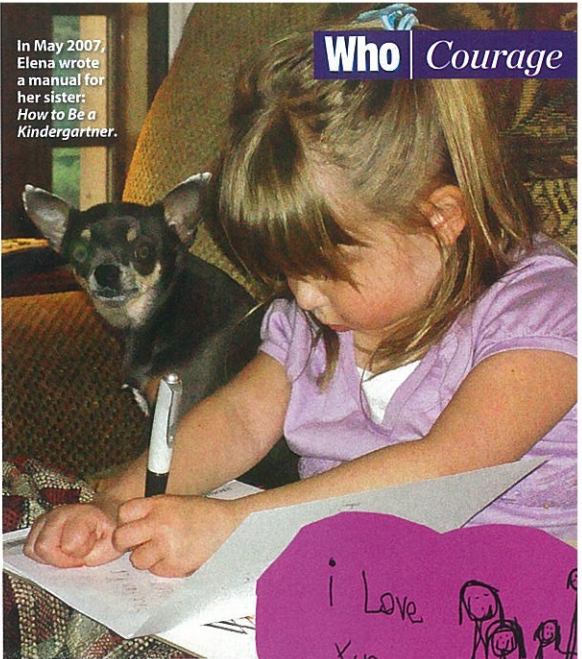


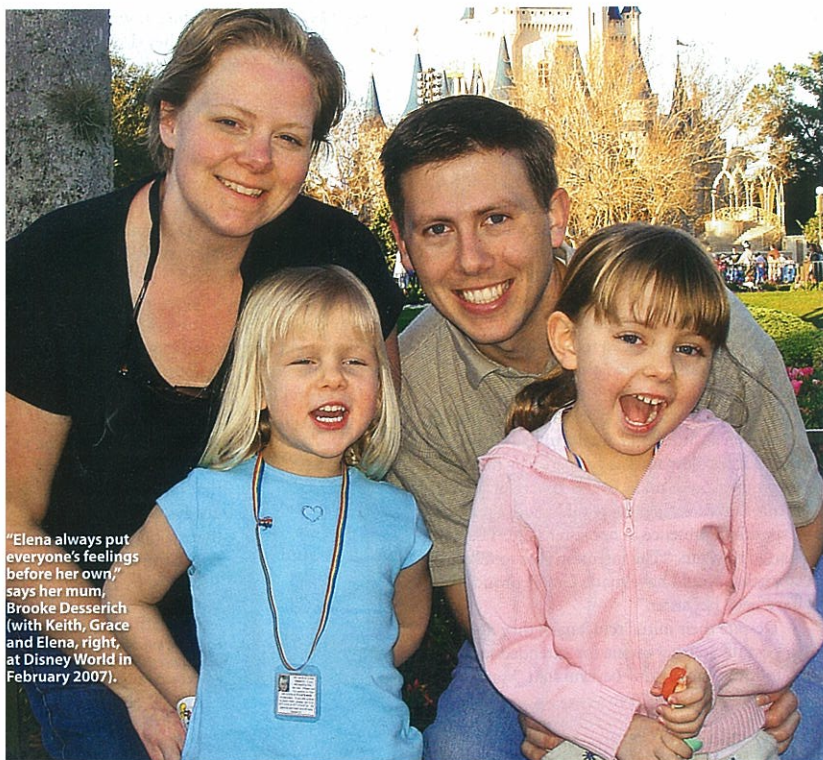
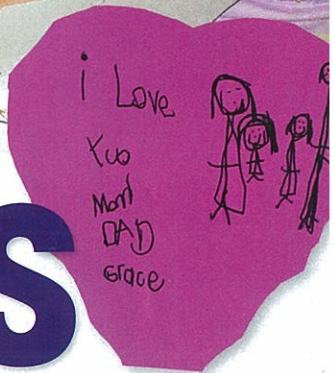


"All the way through, she was as bright as the day she was diagnosed," says Keith of Elena (hospitalised for radiation treatment in January 2007).



In May 2007, Elena wrote a manual for her sister: *How to Be a Kindergartner.*

Hidden TREASURES



"Elena always put everyone's feelings before her own," says her mum, Brooke Desserich (with Keith, Grace and Elena, right, at Disney World in February 2007).

Dying Elena Desserich left a secret legacy of love for her family—and a lesson for us all

They found them inside dresser drawers and bags of Christmas decorations, tucked away in briefcases and wedged behind books and between CDs—love letters to her family from a little girl on borrowed time. After Elena Desserich died at age 6 of brain cancer on Aug. 11, 2007, nine months after her diagnosis, her parents stumbled upon the first of more than a hundred notes she had hidden for them, like smiles from the sky. After finding the first, "you treasure it and hold it close and it makes you cry, but you don't think Elena's hiding them," recalls her father, Keith, who soon realised that Elena, displaying wisdom and prescience far beyond her years, had stashed the notes for her parents and sister, Grace, to uncover over time. "Some are love hearts, some are scraps of paper, most are sad, saying, 'I love you, mum, dad and Grace.' Some saying, 'Go, go, Gracie, go, go...'"

Urging her little sister, now 7, to live big is just a part of Elena's legacy. ➤➤



"Dolphins feel like giant rubber bands," said Elena after swimming with them in Florida on a "wish trip" in March 2007, nearly four months after her diagnosis.



"She'd keep us on our toes," says Keith (with Elena in an undated snap).

Through sharing their story in *Notes Left Behind* (HarperCollins, \$24.99), Cincinnati couple Keith, 34, and Brooke Desserich, 35, hope to raise "millions of dollars for cancer research," says Keith, who is donating proceeds from US and Canadian sales to the Cure Starts Now Foundation that he established with Brooke in Elena's memory. "This is not a book about cancer or a little girl dying, it is about so much more," says Brooke, who owns a construction and cleaning business with her husband. "Each of these pages teaches parents to put the cell phones away or delay those chores and to start cherishing the moments that are given to you."

The idea to celebrate their daughter's life—in a private way, at first, as a journal to help Grace remember her sister—took flight the very day Elena, then 5, was diagnosed with Diffuse Intrinsic Pontine Glioma (DIPG), a deadly tumour at the base of the brain. "The doctors come into us crying and immediately you think they must have come from another room," recalls Keith of Nov. 24, 2006, the day after the US Thanksgiving Holiday. "They broke the news to us this way: 'Every day we have to tell families the worst news possible, but this is the type of cancer we fear.'"

Numb with shock and grief—at first, Elena was given as little as 12 weeks to live—the Desserichs' despair was tempered by their determination to make every day count for Elena, and to ensure she would always remain a sparkling presence in her sister's life. They started to write. "The intention was to tell a story that would have made Gracie proud to have been her sister."

Despite their initial reluctance, they agreed to post the journal online for extended family to follow, "but it grew beyond that," says

Keith. "We started receiving hundreds of letters from people saying, 'We don't know you, but the online journal has changed the way we relate to our children, please keep writing.'" Elena's courage and heart fed their musings, which became *Notes Left Behind*. The blue-eyed kindly student who idolised Picasso "was very old for her age," says Keith. "To understand Elena, you have to know that when you walked into her room, her books would be ordered by colour and size on her bookshelf. She was always wise. Often, we felt like the children and Elena was the mum."

The way she endured the ravaging effects of her illness was characteristic of sunny-natured Elena, who preferred her milk out of a wine-glass (with a "cheers" to boot). Within two weeks of the diagnosis, "she couldn't eat, she couldn't talk, she couldn't hear out of her right ear or see out of her right eye and was having trouble breathing," says Keith. "Her body shut down. We would wake Elena in the morning and she'd smile at you and look at you, she was very peaceful," he adds softly, his voice cracking. "And she'd look at the rest of her body and in her mind you could tell she was thinking, 'What am I going to lose today?' We think that is when Elena started writing notes."

But Elena kept something for herself, too, by making a record of things she wanted to accomplish: down the list, after "Eiffel Tower," was to buy a wedding dress. Before

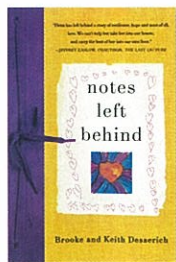
Elena's illness, she and Grace would ooh and ah over the wedding gowns in a boutique they drove past on their way to the Wyoming Central School. "Every day it was a game which colour

and type of dress they would choose," explains Keith. "I would ask them to pick their wedding dress, never imagining we would be buying hers at age six."

A week before her death, Elena fulfilled her wish, wearing "the frilliest, pink, lace, ruffled dress we could find," says Keith, to be flower girl at his cousin's wedding, where she made her way down the aisle in her wheelchair. But the biggest gift was Elena's to give. "Soon after we started finding notes, I was changing briefcases and I found a note addressed to me,

and she had even dated it," says Brooke. "I don't know if I will ever open that one, because I always want to know there is one last note."

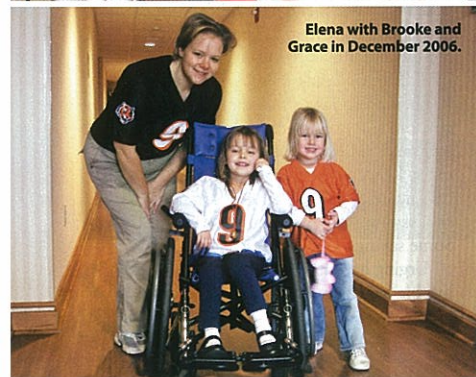
■ **By Karina Machado.**
Reported by Louise Talbot



For more information, visit www.notesleftbehind.com and www.thecurestartsnow.org



Elena in hospital in January 2007: so far, her parents have found three boxes full of notes.



Elena with Brooke and Grace in December 2006.