

# Love notes from Elena

Brooke and Keith Desserich had always known their little girl Elena was amazing. Yet they never dreamed she would plan a secret gift that would not only help heal their hearts, but also spread hope and inspiration to thousands of others...

In the palm of her hand, Brooke Desserich holds a small, unopened envelope. On the front, there's a heart carefully drawn in bright red crayon. And inside, the Cincinnati mom knows, there's a love note.

And there's also something else. Something even more precious. Because tucked into that envelope is hope. Healing. And a hug all the way from Heaven...

Three years ago, Brooke and her husband, Keith, felt so blessed to share countless hugs with their daughters, five-year-old Elena and Gracie, four.

"Best friends forever," they'd smile, listening to Elena play teacher to Gracie's student.

Then, one day, Elena's voice grew hoarse, and she was suddenly dizzy.

Just a cold, Brooke and Keith thought. But tests showed it was far worse: an inoperable brain tumor.

Radiation could shrink the tumor to give Elena some time. But the truth was, she had only about four months to live.

Four months? Brooke's heart broke. How can we squeeze a lifetime into barely 134 days?

## Making memories to last a lifetime

They didn't—couldn't—explain the details to Elena. Yet she'd always been bright, wise beyond her years. And somehow, she understood.

So she began making wishes. Some were simple, like asking for chocolate-vanilla swirl ice

cream or a princess-like ride in a horse-drawn carriage. Others were a bit more tricky: swimming with dolphins. Visiting the Eiffel Tower. Driving a car. But every request was like an arrow through Brooke's heart.

"Can you take me shopping on the street with the pretty dresses?" Elena asked, and they realized: the wedding shops. Keith had promised to take her there when she was grown and getting married. But now, Elena would never have a wedding day.

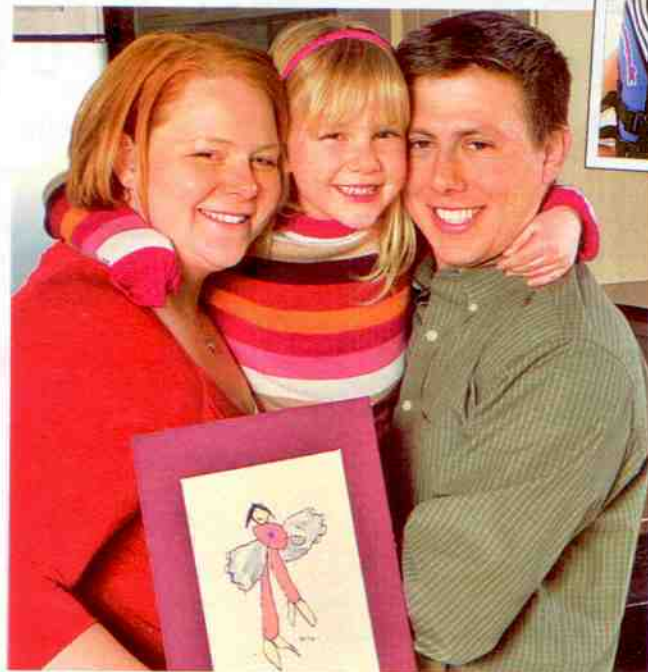
So Keith and Brooke made a vow: "No matter where we are, we have to make every moment a special one."

They took time off work and skipped through Disney World together, licking ice cream cones. They pressed their noses against the glass at the zoo's panda house and

stroked the sides of silky dolphins. And when a reporter arranged to have one of budding artist Elena's paintings—called "I Love You"—displayed in the Cincinnati Art Museum, she beamed, "It's next to a Picasso!"

Even when the tumor stole her ability to speak, Elena lovingly created "The Kindergarten Survival Guide" for Gracie, sketching her best tips for making school a success, like *Be quiet in the cafuteryu*.

Brooke and Keith also found solace in writing, beginning an online journal for Gracie to read someday so she'd never forget those precious last moments with her sister. And when the website began crashing, they



"Elena [inset] is still bringing joy to us—and the world!" say her parents, Brooke and Keith, with Gracie and one of Elena's love letters.

were amazed to discover it was because 12,000 people were logging on for inspiration.

*You taught me that it's time with those we love that really matters,* one reader posted.

Oh, Elena, Brooke thought, blinking back tears, even as you fight for life, you're teaching others how to live!

## Hugs from Heaven

Elena continued to fight. But nine months after her diagnosis, she slipped away.

Brooke and Keith knew they had to go on, for Gracie's sake. Yet their hearts felt so empty without Elena.

Then one day, while moving a stack of books, something fluttered to the ground.

What's this? Brooke wondered—and picking up the heart-shaped paper, she realized: It's a note. From Elena!

*I love you mom dad grace Elena,* it said. And, for a moment, it felt as though Elena was there in her arms again.

Incredibly, they were soon finding more notes. Tucked into Keith's jeans. Pressed between pages of books. Even in bags of hand-me-downs saved for Gracie.

And with each one, Brooke found herself marveling: You *knew* this would help us heal, didn't you, Elena?

In time, buoyed by Elena's letters, Brooke and Keith found the strength to start The Cure Starts Now, an organization that hopes to wipe out pediatric brain cancer. And this fall, *Notes Left Behind*—the story of Elena's incredible courage and remarkable gift to them—will be published.

Today, most of Elena's love notes have been discovered. So Brooke treasures the final one she found, saving it unopened. That way, they will always have one last hug from Elena.

"Elena wanted to be a teacher, so I think she'd be amazed that her lessons of hope and love have reached so many," Brooke says. "She will always be our hero!"

—Nanette Waitas Holt

**Did you know?**  
You can purchase notecards designed by Elena at [thecurestartsnow.org](http://thecurestartsnow.org).

## How to start a family journal! "Writing in a family journal is a great way for children to process emotions and create a lasting record of memories," says Gail Saltz, M.D.

**✓ Pick the right size!**  
A bound scrapbook with big pages is ideal if you have small children who have large handwriting and like to draw. Older children and teens can use a smaller diary-size journal.

**✓ Give everyone a voice!**  
Ask each family member to create an "About the Authors" page with photos and lists of their favorite hobbies, foods and subjects in school.

**✓ Make it spontaneous!**  
Keep your book handy for spur-of-the-moment entries, and let everyone know that contributions should be heartfelt—not perfect!

**✓ Mark special occasions!**  
Add birthday and Christmas wish lists, New Year's resolutions and recipes and menus of special dinners to your journal.

