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Cindy Lange-Kubick: Giving back the indispensable gift of memories

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Haley Buchenau (left), her twin sister, Hannah, and mom, Sandy, will hold a car wash on Sunday, July 24, as a fundraiser for the Jack and Jill Foundation. The car wash will be in a parking lot near 27th and Superior streets. (GWYNETH ROBERTS/Lincoln Journal Star)

That?

That's Silly Daddy Bob Buchenau mugging for the camera, looking like he's just stuck his face in a bowl of mashed potatoes.

He probably had, says Bob's wife, Sandy.

"He was always doing something funny for the girls."

He would be gone in seven weeks. But on that wonderful weekend in March 2010, Bob and Sandy and the twins didn't think about cancer or hospital bills or the future.

"We had such a good time. It was awesome to get away and not have to think about anything."

There are other photos of Silly Daddy in the album of their dream trip to Tucson. Daddy in a pink cowgirl hat. Daddy fishing with Hannah and Haley. Daddy on the plane, leaving Lincoln with a big grin.

On Sunday, Sandy and the twins are hosting a carwash. And all the money is going to the organization that made Tucson possible: The Jack and Jill Late Stage Cancer Foundation.

"It's all about making memories for the children," Sandy says. "It meant so much to us at a time when we really needed it."

Bob was 42 when he was diagnosed with tonsil cancer. It was Stage 4, but they just knew they could beat it. Six months later, a spot on his liver turned out to be colon cancer, totally unrelated.

Shortly after Bob's first diagnosis, Sandy's sister was on her computer and discovered the Jack and Jill Foundation -- a place kind of like a Make-A-Wish for dying grown ups.

She saw this: "*JAJF ensures the children and their Mom and Dad capture indispensable memories together that will be both a return to some normalcy now and a legacy to cherish.*"

She was intrigued by the nonprofit started by Jon and Jill Albert, parents of two children. Jill had breast cancer and died in 2006, but not before seeing the work of the foundation begin.

Since then, hundreds of families have taken trips the organization calls WOW Experiences. There were two requirements: that a parent has terminal cancer and a child be younger than 18.

Sandy's sister bookmarked the page but hoped she'd never need to share it.

By January 2010, she did.

The staff at Jack and Jill made it so easy, Sandy says. Her sister called and told them their story. Bob's doctors filled out the paperwork, verifying his diagnosis.

By March, the four were packed and off to Star Pass Resort in Arizona, trading snow on the ground for balmy 80-degree days. They slept in a luxury suite, mints on their pillows, beds turned down every night, gift bags for the girls, a golf cart for Bob when he was too tired to walk, chauffeured tours, fine dining.

"Whatever we wanted, it was ours."

Bob died April 30, 2010. This spring, Sandy and her sister found a matchbox car in the flowerbed in front of the house she bought this winter.

The car was green and black with the No. 18 on it -- same colors, same number as Bob's favorite NASCAR driver. Bob left letters behind for Sandy. He told her he wanted them to have a bigger house. He told her he'd always be with them, just to look for the signs.

It felt like a sign that day, the anniversary of his death.

And the carwash feels like it was meant to be, too. The girls have been making posters. Friends have volunteered to help. The Tucson trip meant so much to them, they want to make sure other families can have the same chance. Jack and Jill had given them a camera to take to Tucson. Take as many pictures as you can, they said. After the trip, Sandy mailed the camera back to the foundation and a few weeks later a book arrived in the mail.

It's on the coffee table, filled with photos of a family on leave from real life -- swimming in turquoise water, touring an outdoor museum, watching can-can dancers, posing like outlaws in an Old West photo studio. The twins bounce in and out of the room, playing on the computer, wrestling with the dogs, drinking pickle juice out of the pickle jar, squirting whipped cream into each other's mouths -- identical 10-year-olds who look just like their daddy.

The trip was great, Hannah says when she slows down. "It was super fun."

They'd been married nearly 25 years, Sandy says. The girls were everything to Bob. Even when he was feeling crappy, he'd make sure he was there to go sledding or pick them up from school.

On the trip, he left the cancer behind.

"He was making chicken noises in the lobby," Haley says, cuddled beside her mom. "Remember that?"
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