

“Bringing Comfort Is What I’m All About”

by Jon Caswell



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Unlike her fellow accredited visitors in Mended Hearts Chapter 30 in Dallas, Kelsey Chapman will vote for president this fall for the first time. It’s not because she hasn’t been concerned about the issues. She hasn’t voted because she just turned 18!

In March 2007, Kelsey at age 17 underwent open-heart surgery to correct a congenital heart anomaly called a transposed right coronary artery. Her right coronary artery came out on the left side of her heart and wrapped around her aorta.

“My coronary artery was being squeezed between my aorta and my pulmonary artery, so not enough blood could get to the right side of my heart,” said Kelsey, who is a senior at Ursuline Academy in Dallas. “I had tightness in my chest and I felt like I couldn’t breathe.”

In February 2007, it got so bad that her parents took her to the emergency room. A heart sonogram revealed the problem, which was later verified by an angiogram.

Before her diagnosis, Kelsey had always led a very active life, running cross country and track for her school and participating in Students Reach Out, a school service club that does good work in the community. She’s also a top student and a member of the National Honor Society. She studied Spanish and was very involved in art, especially painting.

Being young doesn’t make you immune to fear, but you may respond a little differently: “I was terrified anticipating open-heart surgery,” said Kelsey. “On the way to the hospital that morning I was hugging my stuffed dog named Max.”

Saying goodbye to her parents before the surgery brought home the seriousness of her situation. “One of the hardest moments was when my parents kissed me goodbye,” Kelsey said. “I was hoping it would not be the last time I heard them say they loved me.”



Like many people facing open-heart surgery, Kelsey was concerned with the scar. In fact, she and her parents discussed plastic surgery to hide it. But after the operation she had a different attitude.

“My scar is my personal badge signifying my life and struggle,” she wrote in a paper for an English class. “It will forever be a reminder to live every day the way I would want to if it were my last, and to treat people as if I might never see them again. I am an incredibly lucky person, and I have decided that my life from now on will be entirely different.”

That’s where Mended Hearts comes in. Kelsey joined MHI soon after her operation and quickly became an accredited visitor. Every Monday she visits at Presbyterian Hospital, where she had her surgery. She also takes extra shifts when needed. In addition, three hours a week she visits people who are terminally ill at a hospice.

“What I like about visiting is sharing stories and helping people cope,” she said. “I just really like connecting with people and bringing comfort to them, like at the hospice. Bringing comfort is what I’m all about.”

Toward that end, she is studying American Sign Language, in addition to continuing her Spanish studies. She hopes to visit Spanish-speaking heart patients. “Right now I can understand what they’re saying, but it takes me a little time to respond.”

In addition to visiting heart and hospice patients for several hours every week, Kelsey also volunteered at the Mended Hearts booth at last year’s American Heart Walk in Dallas.

Clearly Kelsey has a good heart, and now that it is repaired, she has a clear plan for her future. “I have used this life-changing event to jumpstart my life,” she said. “After graduation this spring, I plan to attend the University of Colorado and major in integrated physiology with minors in Spanish and art. Then I’m going to medical school to become a cardiologist or cardiothoracic surgeon.”

Kelsey is at least 40 years younger than her fellow MHI members, but she’s proud of her affiliation and of being an accredited visitor. “I feel like I’ve accomplished it on my own,” she said. “My friends at school kind of kid me about hanging out with all the ‘old’ people, but I feel good about helping others, and I love it.”

Like she said, “Bringing comfort is what I’m all about.” ❤️



Top row, left to right: Kelsey and sister, Kate; Kelsey and friend, Callie; Kelsey and friend, Leslie

Above: Kelsey's paintings “Blue Mountain” (l) and “Charelston Flower Box” (r)

JOY and SADNESS

Charlie Lincoln is the president of Chapter 30. When asked about Kelsey, he said, “When we speak about Kelsey in our chapter, it is with joy and also some sadness. Kelsey is loved because of her attitude and obvious early maturity. She is a joy to be around and extremely reliable. For such a young girl, she gives strength to a lot of older folks. She and I both visit at the same hospital every week, and I occasionally see some patients she has seen. They always remember her and really look up to her. I recently had a patient tell me, ‘I was visited by Kelsey, the young girl who had a worse situation than me, and isn’t she the picture of life? She was great, and we will be at a meeting to see her again.’ Is that inspiring?”

“Now the sad part: Kelsey will be leaving the chapter this summer to attend college. We will definitely miss her. Last year she missed a meeting and no less than a half dozen members asked about her! We will all be with her while she is away. Her parents should be proud!”

Charlie Lincoln, Kelsey and Dolores Dries

