

“Living Her Purpose”

by Jon Caswell



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Amanda Eason, age 36, has not always been a woman on a mission. That took a few years to develop. First, she had to have her life consumed by congenital heart disease (CHD). (Amanda has just retired as the National Volunteer Coordinator for Mended *Little* Hearts.)

She and her husband Mike were in their early 20s and had only been married a year when their son Jacob, now 12, was born with hypoplastic left heart syndrome (HLHS) and had a heart transplant at six weeks of age. Amanda and Mike went through that experience completely alone, never getting the kind of support that could have eased some of their fears and uncertainty.

“The psychological effects of seeing your child go through something as drastic as open-heart surgery or a heart transplant is indescribable,” Amanda said. “Mike saw his father have a quadruple bypass, but that didn’t compare to the emotional impact of seeing his son go through what he did.”

But the Easons survived and learned the very complicated ropes of caring for a CHD child. Rejection and infection were (and are) constant concerns. Soon after the transplant, Mike told a high school friend of their experience, and a few years later that friend called back asking if they would speak with his cousin, whose baby had just received an HLHS diagnosis *in utero*.

“I met with her at a pre-natal cardiology appointment,” Amanda said. “We discussed all that our family had gone through with Jacob, then we parted ways and never really had an opportunity to speak after that.” Meanwhile the Easons had another son, Noah, who did not have CHD.

Fast forward another year, to 2001: Amanda meets this same woman, Angela, at a pediatric cardiology carnival. She had just found out about MLH groups forming and mentioned that to Angela. “I think a natural bond is formed when two families go through such similar challenges, and she was excited about the opportunity of us working together to start a local group,” Amanda said. “She was 100 percent supportive and willing to help get MLH of Jacksonville started.” That’s when Amanda found her passion ... and her mission.

MLH of Jacksonville was active from the start, raising both money and awareness. As everyone in MHI knows, success is almost always rewarded with more work, and Amanda was asked to be the first national volunteer committee chair for MLH. When she took the job, there were six MLH groups; when she turned the job over to Susan Vanderpool of Tulsa this past December, there were 23. While she was the committee chair, MLH was also able to raise enough money to hire National Program Coordinator Jodi Lemacks, as well as provide additional support to local groups. “We also held two educational conferences for MLH coordinators and, with the invaluable assistance of the MLH coordinator and Amy Basken of Wisconsin, we became an integral part of the American Heart Association’s Lobby Day in Washington D.C.” Judging by these results, passionate pursuit of a mission must work.

In some ways, Amanda had been primed from early on to pursue a purpose. Her own father has been a great inspiration to her in that regard. He was diagnosed with cancer in the sinus area in 1992, and he fought it for 16 years through many surgeries but passed away the day after Christmas in 2008. “Throughout his valiant battle he never complained about his situation or asked ‘why?’ He remained steadfast in his faith and the source of strength for our entire family. Through his example I have learned many valuable lessons that I will carry with me for the rest of my life, but the most important lesson I learned from him was that we are here for a reason, and we are to seek out that reason in order to fulfill its purpose.

“MLH has had such a tremendous impact on my life,” Amanda continued. “Since joining MLH, I have realized that my purpose is to use my experiences to help others. MLH has given me a clear direction for the life I want to lead, and for that reason I will always hold a special place in my heart for this wonderful organization.”

Amanda may have left the national committee chair position, but she has not abandoned her mission. In addition to remaining as co-coordinator of MLH of Jacksonville, she is also working for the Starlight Children’s Foundation. “My job is to plan monthly events for seriously ill children and their parents. Every month we do a different party for these families.”

Nor is her life all work and no play. Amanda is a huge NASCAR fan, and she, Mike and the boys travel to events whenever they can. As a special treat, Mike bought her stock-car-driving lessons at the Richard Petty Driving Experience at the Daytona Speedway. “I did eight laps and got up to 146 mph,” Amanda said. “I think that was enough for me.”

As executive vice president, Dale Briggs worked closely with Amanda. “Amanda has been involved from the start,” Dale said. “She attended the first meeting for coordinators in Dallas in 2004. She is amazingly organized and has been a real asset to MLH. She has worked very hard to get us to where we are today.”

National Program Coordinator Jodi Lemacks also praised Amanda’s leadership during this period of growth: “Amanda has accomplished so many things for MLH. She set the stage for the organization to grow and flourish by getting a good feel for MHI and how MLH fits in. She has a way of seeing the big picture, what needs to happen for MLH to be successful. I was very grateful to have Amanda to call for advice. She is a fabulous leader of her local group as well. MLH is incredibly blessed to have her as a vital part of the organization.”

“I cannot express how deeply moving it has been to experience the encouragement, excitement and support of MHI and its members,” Amanda said. “MLH would never have existed had it not been for the foresight of MHI members. Although I have stepped down as the committee chair, I have not lost my love for this entire organization. I will continue my mission with the Jacksonville program and look forward to seeing you all again someday soon. Until that time, may we all keep inspiring hope, providing encouragement, and seeking answers for a better tomorrow.” ❤️



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TOP TO BOTTOM: Jacob, Amanda & Noah; Jacob, Amanda & Noah in the Florida Keys; Amanda at Daytona Speedway