

Paula's Story

CHAPTER 1



Decision

February 9, 2007, was the night I had to make a life-or-death decision. I couldn't believe I would ever have to make a decision of this magnitude, one we had talked about and hoped would never happen. But it did. Do I choose to keep Stephanie alive or believe the doctors and disconnect the breathing tube?

On February 3, 2007, Stephanie wasn't feeling well. She complained of a headache and was unable to eat much dinner. At 7:30, she was on her way to bed. This is highly unusual for her, the night owl, who usually is up until 11 p.m. or even later. I heard a loud BOOM as she went to bed and realized she had fallen down one flight of stairs, something she had never done before in her life. She hit her head on the wall, broke her right wrist, and had a deep cut on her left hand. After a few hours at the emergency room, the hospital released her with pending surgery for pins in her wrist. While at the ER, Stephanie was given a head CT, computer tomography, to confirm there was no bleeding on the brain.

Everything looked normal. That coming week she was laid up on pain medication due to the severe cut on her hand and her broken wrist. On Thursday, February 8, Stephanie had outpatient surgery to place pins in her wrist. She came home sleepy but feeling fine.

Friday, February 9, began as a normal day. She was feeling much better, moving around and talking about how frustrated she was because for a few weeks she wouldn't be able to work at the three south end middle schools in Seattle as a consultant. This concept drove her crazy. I reiterated that this was a blessing and she needed some rest, so take it. Anyone who knows Steph understands that resting is never an option when there is work to be done! Stephanie spent 15 years as a teacher and another 15 years as a principal. She could retire, but she was not ready. She began her own consulting company after she retired from Madison Middle School in 2001.

That evening I was busy working on my school district's budget. As part of the district committee, our job was to create scenarios that would cut two million dollars. Stephanie gladly offered to help. She was a great resource and was very coherent, creating alternative scenarios that even our Superintendent hadn't considered. I was having a difficult time keeping up with her and continually asked her to slow down and explain what she meant.

Suddenly, she complained of a headache and needed to use the restroom. Her face was the color of a ripe tomato,

and she wanted a wet cloth for her head, saying she had never experienced a headache like this in her life. By the time I returned with the wet cloth, I could tell something was terribly wrong. She was in agonizing pain and was unable to talk. I helped her back to the couch and was about to get some aspirin for her head when a massive seizure began. All I could remember to do was to get her on her side and move all objects away. I managed to get her on the floor, propped up against the couch, but the seizure wouldn't stop. I didn't want to let go of her but had to in order to call 911. I had to go outside to the garage to access the switch to open the gate for the ambulances to get onto the property. By the time I returned to the house she was breathing but unresponsive. I was afraid she was going to die, and thoughts ran through my head at mach speed. What did I give her for dinner? Did I give her too many of her pain medications? What can I do now?

I was afraid she would choke because of the foam coming out of her mouth. She wouldn't respond. The 911 operator, bless her soul, kept me calm and had me keep talking with her and checking her pulse. The ambulances, yes, two, arrived within five minutes. They immediately moved me out of the way, rolled her over, and she actually began talking! Whew! I thought this was going to be a bad one, but she seemed to be coming around. As they loaded her into the ambulance, an emergency medical technician said to follow them to the ER as closely as I could. What

was that about? She was talking and seemed OK. This type of response, my Pollyanna side, as others call it, came out often and was what kept me going.

On my way to the hospital, a mere five-minute drive, I called our dear friends Mike and Krissy told them to meet me at Whidbey General Hospital as soon as possible. I also called our friends Susan and Jenna in Seattle and told them what had happened. They were out the door and on the way to Whidbey Island within minutes. The hospital staff instructed Mike, Krissy, and me to stay in the waiting area while the doctors were doing tests on Stephanie. We had no idea what was going on, but we were all scared and anxious.

About twenty minutes later, we were ushered back into the ER. Steph's eyes were open, but she was not responding. The ER Doctor informed us that her CT showed a bleed in the brain, and the helicopter was on its way to take her to Harborview Medical Center in Seattle. I was in shock. How could this happen? I immediately told the doctor I was leaving so I could make the ferry and get there around the same time as the helicopter. His response was, "Don't leave her now; I am not sure she will make it until the transport arrives." This was the first time I knew how serious the situation was, but I just couldn't get my head to believe what I was hearing. All hell broke loose at that point. She started seizing again and her pupils were unresponsive. No fewer than ten people flooded around her. The doctor jumped on top of her placing a tube down her

throat to keep her breathing. There were tubes attached and bells going off. The faces of the staff told the story. The situation was dire. I stood in shock watching as if it were an episode of TV's *Grey's Anatomy*. I wish it had been.

Luckily, our neighbors and good friends who both work at the hospital heard about the situation and arrived (small town, small hospital – I will forever love it). Jochen, a doctor, explained what was happening and showed me Steph's brain scan on the computer. There was clearly something wrong. A huge dark mass engulfed half of her brain. Finally, the helicopter arrived with four paramedics. I pleaded with the paramedics to ride in the helicopter, but they emphatically stated, "No!" They whipped Stephanie out of there before we could say anything. It was a surreal feeling watching that helicopter fly away not knowing if I would ever see her alive again.

After I called again, Susan and Jenna immediately turned around from the Whidbey Island-Mukilteo ferry terminal and headed back toward Seattle to Harborview. I also called Steph's sister, Dori, and her husband, John. They were on the way from their home in Gig Harbor. I returned home, called friends to meet at the house to take Ruby, our dog, and grabbed a few things, not knowing how long we would be gone. Mike, Krissy, and I headed for the ferry.

The trip to Harborview was excruciating--thoughts of Stephanie kept flashing through my brain. Did all of this

really happen? Mike had the tough conversations with me during that drive, a conversation that no one else I knew would've been able to do. He let me know that my life as I knew it had changed. Best-case scenario, he said, she recovers and lives an ordinary life. Worst-case scenario, she is brain dead and I will have to make the decision to end her life. We talked frankly about the decisions I would have to make and that staying strong was the only way to get through the coming challenges. He assured me that no matter what happened, I would be all right. Life is tough, but the tough get through it. I knew I had to get my head ready for what was sure to be a long, frightening night. The conversation, although very hard, helped calm me down and realize that I could handle whatever I had to face. I would not be alone.

We arrived at Harborview around midnight, and I immediately rushed into see Stephanie while Mike and Krissy looked for a parking place. Susan, Jenna, Dori, and John were surrounding Stephanie, as she lay hooked to numerous tubes and on a ventilator. A neurosurgeon resident arrived and explained that her situation was extremely serious based on the CT scans from Whidbey. He told me that if she survived she was likely to be a vegetable and might never be able to communicate. Discussions Stephanie and I had regarding living and dying rammed into my head. We had both agreed that if we were responsible for each other, we would be strong enough to end each other's

lives. Even though we had those conversations, I wanted to avoid the possibility. However, I couldn't avoid it because the doctors didn't know her and couldn't ever know for sure how her brain would function. I knew that removing equipment, declining elaborate brain tests, or refusing surgery would close the door to her life forever. I wanted to try to keep that door open.

The doctor wanted a decision--unplug the machine or attempt to keep her alive. He was very clear. If she lived through surgery, she could have massive disabilities, ranging from the inability to speak, walk, live in her house, serve a meal, take a shower, or interact with others ever again. Based on the results of the MRI, magnetic resonance imaging, the doctors at Harborview rated her 5.5 on a scale of 1 to 5... 6 is death. With all this information, what choice did I have? I knew they had never had a patient as strong-willed as Stephanie, and if anyone could make it, she could.

At that time, I asked the doctor, "Can you guarantee me she will be a vegetable?" His response was, "No, we don't know everything about the brain. I can't guarantee you anything." I looked at Susan, Jenna, Dori, and John for reassurance and then told the doctors emphatically, "Get her to surgery and do all you can to keep her alive, NOW!"