

# WENDY'S WISH

Wendy was always thinking of others ... even in the final week of her life on this earth.

While battling stage 4 colon cancer, Wendy laid out her wishes to her husband, Al, and their closest friends – she wanted a fund established to help pay for cancer education and screenings for low-income and underinsured families.

Thirty-five years ago when Al Huntley and Wendy Barrett were second-year teachers at a small junior high school in Bend, Oregon, they were sent on an assignment to find a Christmas tree for the entry hall. That mission blossomed into a love story that continues today through the Wendy's Wish fund.

## ***Matchmaking***

Wendy and Al were part of a group of 13 new teachers at the same junior high school in 1973. Wendy taught science and Al was the industrial arts teacher.

Late in the fall of their second year, their co-workers—in an obvious effort at matchmaking—sent Al and Wendy to pick out the school's Christmas tree. The couple drove up into the mountains, found the perfect evergreen and cut it down in the headlights of Al's '73 GMC pick-up truck. After dropping Wendy off, Al drove home, backed his truck into the garage ... and broke the top out of the tree.

The next day, Wendy arrived at school excited to see “their” tree on display. But there was no tree. Al was at home gluing the top back on and wiring it in place!

Wendy must have been impressed with Al's resourcefulness because she agreed to attend the staff Christmas party with him. It was their first official date.

Al made a trip with Wendy to the Olympic Peninsula in Washington State to meet her parents who were also properly impressed. In the summer of 1975, Al and Wendy exchanged wedding vows in the beautiful outdoor setting of the Barrett's backyard overlooking the tidal bay.

## ***Crafty lady***

“Wendy was into crafts from the beginning,” says Al. Back in the early 90s, she started the annual Christmas Goose Boutique. She and her

creative friends made crafts and quilted items throughout the year and then held the boutique in November.

Wendy also belonged to a quilting group that met weekly at a local quilt shop. They called themselves the Basket Cases. Spearheaded by Wendy, they were a very charitable group of women – among other things they made quilts for the families of fallen soldiers, survivors of Hurricane Katrina and the local Sparrow Club auction.

### *Idyllic life interrupted*

The Huntleys bought their first home in 1976 – the house Al still lives in. Wendy took a position at one of the local high schools teaching biology and Al quit teaching to pursue cabinet-making. Their firstborn, Heidi, came along in 1980, followed by her younger sister, Heather, in 1982.

When Heidi was born, Al closed down his business and went back to teaching full-time while Wendy stayed home to raise their daughters, filling in as an occasional substitute teacher.

The Huntleys enjoyed traveling but didn't do anything unless they had the cash to pay for it. Their earlier vacations were close to home as they filled photo albums with family memories.

And then in 1998, their idyllic life was disrupted. Wendy, at age 46, discovered a lump and was diagnosed with breast cancer. She elected to do the most radical treatment at the time – a mastectomy followed by chemotherapy. She wanted to be around to watch her girls graduate from college, help plan their weddings and cuddle with grandchildren.

Wendy was home recuperating from surgery when the annual Christmas Goose Boutique rolled around. She was relegated to an easy chair and had to let everyone else do all the work, which didn't make her happy. Her mission was to distribute informational brochures and educate boutique shoppers on the importance of breast self examinations and screenings.

Wendy couldn't have known that day that her efforts might have helped save lives—the Huntleys later learned of at least two women who followed through with self-exam and mammography and were diagnosed with cancer. Both have survived and as of this writing are nearing their 10-year anniversaries of being cancer free.

Al and Wendy participated in all the cancer walks to raise funds and breast cancer awareness, and Wendy was an indispensable mentor when one of her best friends was diagnosed with breast cancer one year later.

Life was good and things were getting back to a new normal for the Huntley family.

### ***Snorkeling and dancing in flip-flops***

Looking back, Al is sure that Wendy started exhibiting signs of colon cancer in early November of 2004. She was anemic, her blood count was in the low 20s and the doctors couldn't quite understand how she was functioning. They began by looking for breast cancer metastases.

By Christmas Eve with no confirmed diagnosis, Wendy announced to her doctor that she and Al were going to the Galapagos Islands, a trip they had been planning for a year.

Wendy was told she couldn't make the trip without a blood transfusion. The next day – Christmas Day – she received a unit of blood and then she and Al left that afternoon for a week in Ecuador, four days at the headwaters of the Amazon and eleven days of snorkeling and hiking in the Galapagos.

By Mother's Day weekend in 2005, the medical team was finally able to determine the problem. Al and Wendy received the news together: stage 3 colon cancer.

Wendy had a colon resection and began chemotherapy after healing from surgery. But in May 2006, just two or three treatments before her final course, it was discovered that the cancer had metastasized to her liver and there was a small spot on her lung.

In June, Wendy had a liver lobectomy with plans to resume chemo, but she elected to put off treatments temporarily. Heidi was engaged to a young man, Jon, who was preparing to enter med school at NYU. Their wedding date was set for August 5.

The Thursday before the wedding, with friends and relatives in town, the Huntleys threw a party at their house and Wendy managed to break her toe. Wendy wasn't about to let a broken toe stop her from dancing at her daughter's wedding. "It was an outdoor wedding and a nice, warm August evening," says Al, "so Wendy danced in flip-flops."

### ***Wendy's wish***

Shortly after the wedding, Al says that Wendy had a meltdown crisis and was admitted to the hospital for stabilization. She started the new chemo, but didn't tolerate it very well. Around the middle of August, Wendy was relegated to hospice care.

Al had rearranged their master bedroom into a mini-apartment so Wendy wouldn't have to negotiate the stairs. Their closest friends stopped by to visit and Wendy basically laid out her wishes during what would be her last week. She wanted a fund set up to pay for cancer education and screenings and, in her words, "because there were already enough walk-a-thons," she wanted the fundraising to be centered around quilts.

Wendy remained upbeat until the very end. She died at home on August 24, 2006. There were quilts on display at her memorial service and a brass quartet played. Heidi and Heather created a multi-media DVD of Wendy's life, and friends and family members shared their fond memories of this brave cancer warrior with her generous spirit.

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*“ Wendy laid her wishes out with all of us in her last week and because there were already enough walk-a-thons, she wanted it centered around quilts. ”*

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### ***Team effort***

True to Wendy's wishes, Al and Wendy's friends established a fund under the umbrella of the St. Charles Foundation, appropriately named Wendy's Wish. The Christmas Goose Boutique carries on, with proceeds going to the fund.

The Wendy's Wish committee also works in conjunction with the Sisters (Oregon) Outdoor Quilt Show, creating and collecting hundreds of fabric postcards from around the world with proceeds benefiting the Wendy's Wish fund.

Al has retired from teaching but has several hobbies—he makes cabinets and furniture, restores old cars, hunts and fishes and dabbles in photography.

The irony is that colon cancer has become one of the least deadly cancers – thanks to highly reliable tests – *if* caught in its earliest stages. Wendy didn't have the good fortune of early detection, but her final wish was that others would. And Al and many of her friends have taken those wishes to heart and are honoring her life through the Wendy's Wish fund.