

HOME

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Up Close

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Colleen's Dream Foundation

*Nicole and Billy
Cundiff take making
a difference
personally*

By Susan Lanier-Graham

Photos by Carl Schultz

Nicole and Billy Cundiff had, for the most part, a sort of charmed life. He with an NFL career and she as a lawyer, following in her father's footsteps. Life changed dramatically in September 2007 when Nicole's mother, Colleen Drury, was diagnosed with Stage 3C ovarian cancer. That terminal diagnosis, which ended in Drury's death in February 2013, may have left some people broken. Not the Cundiffs. Instead, it motivated them to share Drury's passion for life, to make the world aware of ovarian cancer, and to help find an early diagnosis screening test for the deadly disease by creating Colleen's Dream Foundation.

Colleen Drury and Ovarian Cancer

The Cundiffs met at Drake University in Iowa and have been together since they were 20. Now married for 11 years, they've had what Billy calls a "fun ride together." He finished college and launched his football career with the Dallas Cowboys. While in Dallas, Nicole finished law school. In the ensuing years, Billy has played for 13 teams, spending the past two years with the Cleveland Browns. The couple moved to Phoenix part-time in 2005, and Nicole practiced law with her father. They were expecting their first child when life turned upside down.

"My mom was amazing," says Nicole. "She was stunningly beautiful, but even more beautiful on the inside... she was a total sap and cared about everyone."

Drury didn't fit any of the stereotypes for a cancer patient. She was active, worked out daily, ran marathons, and traveled the world. In fact, as with many ovarian cancer patients, her symptoms were easily dismissed.

"Ovarian cancer is known as the silent killer," explains Nicole. "Most women and their doctors don't recognize the symptoms until they're in Stage 3C or Stage 4. The symptoms are so vague because they are things women experience every month. For my mom, it was only when the pain

became so debilitating did we recognize that there was a problem.”

According to the Ovarian Cancer National Alliance, 22,280 women were diagnosed with ovarian cancer in 2012 and 15,500 died. Most diagnoses are in women over the age of 40 with advanced stage cancer. If ovarian cancer is diagnosed in the early stages, it has a 92 percent five-year survival rate.

The Cundiffs, through Colleen’s Dream, work to raise money to fund scientific research that they hope will someday lead to an accurate early detection test. The couple partnered with some of the best doctors in the world to set up the grants. Just as important as the grants, however, are the lives they touch.

“It’s important for men to understand ovarian cancer,” explains Billy. “Not everyone has a sister, wife or girlfriend, but everyone has a mom. Basically, if the symptoms a woman experiences every month persist for more than two weeks, go talk to your doctor.”

Those symptoms include back pain, bloating, pressure/pain in the abdomen, feeling full quickly, constipation or diarrhea, and abnormal vaginal bleeding or discharge.

Colleen’s Dream is Born

Not only is there no early screening for ovarian cancer, many times the CA-125 blood test used in diagnosis gives false positives or negatives. For Drury, a CT scan provided the definitive and surprising answer. Rather than give up, Drury fought to the end, helping conceptualize Colleen’s Dream while spending her time with family and traveling.



The organization's goals are best summed up in Drury's own words: "As I look out in the future, I dream of a time when women of all ages will have a reliable early detection test for ovarian cancer and more humane treatment for those women with late stage ovarian cancer."

Today, Billy echoes those words. "We want to fund a diagnostic test," he explains. "I don't want my own daughter to go through this. We need a test similar to the Pap smear used to diagnose cervical cancer. Our goal is to have a party one day to say we did it, we have a test."

To help fund that research, the Cundiffs—now full-time Phoenix residents even though Billy spends much of his time in Cleveland—donate their time to the organization and work throughout the year to raise funds and educate the community.

"This is personal," says Billy.

Since the birth of their third child two years ago, Nicole quit practicing law to be with the kids and donate her time to Colleen's Dream. In the past two years, the organization has awarded more than \$250,000 in research grants.

Keeping the Dream Alive

As part of Colleen's Dream, the Cundiffs launched "Kicking for the Dream" in which kickers—professional athletes such as Nick Novak and Spencer Lanning, alongside high school and college athletes and the general public—raise money for the cause. The money stays in the local communities and has helped young researchers at such places as Johns Hopkins, the Cleveland Clinic, Memorial Sloan Kettering, the Hollings Cancer Center at University of South Carolina, and Georgia Tech.

"This is so personal for us," says Nicole. "We don't want to lose touch with what our mom wanted. It's about these women."

For more information on Colleen's Dream and

ovarian cancer, visit www.colleensdream.org.

