



My Toughest Assignment; The One That Never Aired

By Bret Burkhart

It was his eyes that did it. Big, brown, penetrating eyes that captured my heart from the moment I entered his small apartment in Oakland. Despite his young age of only 14 months, they were the eyes of an old soul, capable of communicating so much pain and yet joy at the same time. This little boy's fight had already touched hundreds of lives around the bay area. Mine would be next.

We grow thick skins over the years while covering tragic stories; we have to, or the emotions played out at story after story can cause irreparable harm. But no amount of training or time on the job could have prepared me for the emotional binds that challenged my ability to keep some perspective on this story. Cole Regan refused to let me remain a detached journalist.

Cole came into my life while we were preparing for the 2004 KGO Cure-a-Thon, our annual fundraiser for the Leukemia and Lymphoma Society. Cole was to be one of our special honorees at the event, and I was asked to bring listeners his story in order to preview and promote the Cure-a-thon. Typically, KGO airs several behind-the-scenes stories of those who have waged battles with these diseases. For all of our reporters, these are tough but often heart-warming assignments, especially when the person being profiled is winning the battle and sometimes even the war.

Cole was diagnosed with Acute Myeloid Leukemia at the age of 7 weeks. Doctors believe, though, that he developed it before he was even born. He spent his very first Christmas Day beginning what would be a series of 5 rounds of chemotherapy. His body was a fragile ten pounds. Doctors gave him a 10% chance of surviving. Survive he did, though, overcoming Acute Respiratory Distress Syndrome (ARDS,) a devastating respiratory disease that typically claims 80% of its victims. He overcame a deadly form of fungus in his brain and spine, 30 surgeries, dozens of transfusions and 6 weeks on a life-support system. He had been placed under anesthesia more than 60 times and by the time I'd met him, he'd spent more time in the hospital than in his home.

Sometimes we connect with the people we interview, and other times it's just another day at the office. I felt an immediate connection when I first entered Cole's apartment. His parents, Brandy and Keith, were my age, and we shared common interests. Cole was born just a few months after my youngest daughter. His noises, movements and smiles were all so recognizable to me as a new dad. And he seemed to be thriving in what was a new environment for him: his own home.

And yet his home wasn't like the one to which I'd brought my newborn. There were the stuffed animals, colorful pictures, and other reminders of the infant world. But there were also medical pumps, countless IV's and a refrigerator filled with medication.

Cole's story, heard on KGO, and his appearance with his parents at the Cure-a-Thon, inspired listeners to open their hearts and wallets, resulting in a record 810-thousand dollars donated to help find a cure for leukemia and lymphoma. I was amazed at the strength Brandy and Keith Regan showed, and their willingness to share their every high and low to help me better understand their fight so that I could share the story with listeners.

Typically, our relationships with those we interview last only as long as their stories remain in the headlines. My relationship with the Regans was different. Had we met through other circumstances, we'd still have become friends. But it was unfortunate circumstances that sparked an unexpected relationship, though one that left me feeling as if I wasn't able to pull my share. Despite our common interests, at the end of the day we were facing completely different challenges. I felt a tremendous responsibility to offer emotional support as a friend, no longer just a reporter.

The meaning of our friendship was about to be explored even further. I'll never forget the message Keith left on my phone just a couple of months after KGO's Cure-a-Thon. Through his tears, he explained that Cole had suffered a mild stroke. With the sound of traffic in the background, Keith and Brandy were driving Cole to the hospital for what would be the final time. All of the emotions from their 18-month fight were contained in a heartbreaking 30-second message. Keith didn't know what else to say, and simply hung-up mid-sentence.

I was devastated, and at the same time very aware that my feelings paled in comparison to Brandy's and Keith's. All I could think about was their long drive to the hospital, knowing that the car seat in their rear view mirror would be empty when they left.

Doctors found what appeared to be a cancerous mass at the stem of Cole's brain and spinal cord; Cole appeared to have relapsed with his AML. It was so rare that they couldn't give Brandy and Keith an answer as to how much time they had left with their son, but there was no hope of eradicating it. Instead, their next step would be to make Cole as comfortable as possible in the same hospital where he had begun his life.

This wasn't the first time that the Regans had been told to make preparations for Cole's funeral, but there was no doubt that this would be the last. And another phone call from Keith brought me to the final leg of my chronicling Cole's life story, an assignment that was not for our listeners or even to be shared outside

of a circle of friends. Keith asked me to put together a video honoring Cole's short but courageous life.

A million things rushed through my head, from my novice video skills to my incredibly limited spare time. I came up with countless reasons why I was the wrong guy to do this, especially my own feeling that I didn't think I could do justice to this young warrior's story. And then I heard myself saying yes to Keith.

This assignment was the toughest I've ever tackled. I wanted to honor Cole's life as well as his parents' amazing spirit and grace through their own journey. This would be a final farewell for family and friends, with the images and words serving as a lasting impression for Cole's fight. Never had I experienced such an imposing deadline. My deadline would be the impending passing of a gentle and sweet child.



The next few weeks were a blur. I spent hours at Cole's bedside talking to his family, their friends, and the amazing circle of doctors and nurses who had become his extended family. Armed with just my home video camera, I filmed literally enough interviews for a five-hour movie. .

I often checked the Regan's website for their updates on Cole, trying not to bother them as the days went on. One morning, a simple web journal entry on their site let me know that my deadline for this assignment had arrived. The words simply read, "Our little Warrior sleeps."

With the expert help from my friend Mark Drew of KABC in Los Angeles, we were able to translate the tribute that played so clearly in my head into a graceful 35-minute video that could be shared with the people who so dearly loved Cole. On a clear, breezy Sunday afternoon in August, hundreds of people joined hands and hearts for a memorial to Cole's life. The pictures and words on the screen served as a reminder that Cole's life touched so many people, even beyond those who attended his service. There was no greater evidence of this than several months later, when my e-mail box was flooded with notes of sympathy from complete strangers after I had shared this tough assignment in a unique way.

Several months after his passing, I wanted so desperately to keep his name and spirit alive. But, it would have been impossible in a 40-second wrap on the radio to express the emotional binds and friendship I unexpectedly encountered while taking on this most difficult assignment. This story deserved much more. And I found it down the hall in the "new media" department at KGO.

Every month, it sends out an electronic newsletter, giving 300-thousand subscribers a behind the scenes look at station events, contests and up coming news specials. It's simply called, the KGO Listener Club, and up until this point, I was unaware of its impact.

What once was just another office down the hall became the perfect tool for me to share a story listeners wouldn't hear on the air. Never before has a single subject generated such a response for me.

I'm lucky to receive 5 e-mails a month from listeners. Most of those are complaints. But, the dozens of messages sent this time around, seemed to serve a greater purpose. They were from listeners who wanted to share their own thoughts. Many gave thanks for their health; others wanted to offer their personal stories of their own fights against cancer. All of them, though, contained heartfelt messages for Brandy and Keith. Long after the cards and flowers stopped arriving at their doorstep, they found comfort in the words from listeners who wanted their thoughts passed along to Cole's parents. As Brandy noted, "it was so wonderful to hear that Cole is very much still alive in the hearts of strangers, and that he was making a difference in the fight against cancer in the Bay Area and beyond."

Indeed, Cole's legacy was making a difference. Several months later, the KGO Cure-a-Thon marked its 25th year in raising money for a cure, and you might expect the Regans to not want to even hear about the event. But their story, shared in even greater respect with the Listener Club e-mail, rallied the Bay area to raise a record 1.1 million dollars, and Brandy and Keith were there at the studio to give hope to other families facing similar battles.

Brandy and Keith have since been blessed with a baby girl who shares many of the features of the brother she's never met. They are deserving of a long, happy and healthy journey with this child, one enriched by their understanding of how very precious a single life can be. It is my hope that the e-mails of support from our listeners, as well as the video, will serve as tangible reminders for them of the love and inspiration Cole spread in his 21 months on earth. They also keep his memory alive by trying to help other families cope with childhood cancer. Their non-profit organization also relies on an electronic means of communicating. You can read their story and find ways to help others by checking their website. The simple address tells the tale of their enduring hope: www.colescure.org.

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The Regans today, Brandy, Keith and baby Emma