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# From tragedy to triumph

By Lisa Treiber-Walter

## *Paramedic fulfills promise to young accident victim*

Tucked away on the inside of Fredericksburg paramedic Catherine Kuhlmann's helmet is a photo of a brown-haired girl, bright-eyed and full of life.

Barbara Jean Banner's image is creased from age and crumpled from jostling as Kuhlmann responded to countless accident scenes to help those in need.

In the face of so much despair—year after year—it is that old photograph that fuels her.

"When I'm having a bad day ... when I'm tempted to say it's not worth it, I'm tired of getting yelled at ... I remind myself: *she* appreciated it. Her grandfather appreciated it. Her dad did," Kuhlmann said.

Banner was the victim of a head-on collision that claimed the life of her mother, Kathryn Banner, 43, on U.S. Highway 87, north of Fredericksburg 10 years ago.

On March 28, 2002, Banner was eight years old and sleeping in the backseat of the family Suburban as her mother drove them to spend Easter weekend with relatives. In an instant, she was thrown from a peaceful, secure slumber into a world of turmoil in which her mother burned to death and she was grabbed from the wreckage by strangers.

"I was off-duty when the call came in, and Stacy (Kuhlmann's husband) and I left the house. He climbed onto the fire truck and I called (fellow paramedic) Romney Kowert. He picked me up on Main Street in the ambulance," Kuhlmann said.

"We could see the black smoke from the fire more than 10 miles out. It was a horrible feeling," she said. "It was so, so hot. When I was kneeling down working on Barbara, I could feel the heat so hot on my hands," Kuhlmann recalled.

She said she was working on Banner at the same time she was watching the silhouette of the girl's mother in the fire. "I remember I asked her what her mother's name was. She said, 'Kathryn'."

The similarity in names struck a chord. "For whatever reason, she had just lost her mom and somebody needed to step up," Kuhlmann said.

"As a mother of a two-year-old at the time, I was numb. I couldn't even digest what had just occurred, so I put my faith toward God and tried in my own way to step in to help. I guess this Catherine took care of her when her own mommy Kathryn could not," she said.

"She was just screaming and, to be honest, I



Barbara Jean Banner and Catherine Kuhlmann

was probably in just as much shock as she was. She asked me, 'Am I going to be okay?' I remember that specifically. I remember saying: 'Yes, you're going to be okay. You know what? One day, I'm going to watch you walk across the stage at your high school graduation,'" Kuhlmann said.

On Friday, May 25, she was able to do just that.

Barbara Banner, the only child of Brad Banner and the late Kathryn Banner, led the class of 2012 across the stage as valedictorian of Merkel High School. Catherine and Stacy Kuhlmann were both there to hear her speech and see her receive her diploma.

Kuhlmann said her husband also remembers that fateful day. Because of the precarious position of the other driver's pickup, Stacy Kuhlmann had to work carefully in full bunker gear as he crawled for proper access to determine that the driver at fault was deceased as well.

The aftermath of that accident weighed heavily, Catherine Kuhlmann said, adding that she couldn't even deal with it right away.

The bystander who had removed the child from the burning car saved her life, but became so distressed at the scene that Kuhlmann had to drive her back to Fredericksburg and wait for her family to arrive while the bystander was treated for shock at the local emergency room.

When her duty was done, Kuhlmann said, "I shelved this hard. I did some extra stuff afterwards and then I shelved it. It was just too emotional."

"There have been moments in my career when I have been told I get too involved and that I can't save the world. I guess maybe they're correct sometimes," Kuhlmann said.

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"If it were *my* child, I just hope someone would also get 'too' involved and take care of them, if I could not."

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“However, if it were *my* child, I just hope someone would also get ‘too’ involved and take care of them, if I could not. Pay it forward,” she said.

The “extra stuff” she did right after the accident included making two separate trips to University Hospital in San Antonio to visit the young patient being treated in the intensive care unit.

In the head-on crash, Banner had suffered serious back injuries that required treatment at the trauma center, to which she had been flown directly from the scene in Gillespie County.

On one visit to the ICU, Kuhlmann took Banner an Easter basket with a stuffed animal and an angel pin.

That guardian angel had originally been given to Kuhlmann when her own son had been taken by a pediatrics team in an ambulance to Methodist Children’s Hospital for a critical gastro-intestinal bleed.

“It worked for us, so I was hoping it would also watch over her,” she said.

“This call tore at my soul. It was a sad, horrible experience that eventually I tried to put out of my mind. Apparently, God had other plans,” she said.



*Paramedic Catherine Kuhlmann carries a picture of Barbara Jean Banner to remind her why she does what she does. Kuhlmann responded to a crash 10 years ago that critically injured Banner and killed her mother. Kuhlmann’s care for the child and her surviving family carried through the last decade and was highlighted in May when Kuhlmann saw Banner graduate as the valedictorian of her high school class.*

On five occasions, Merlyn Stock of Lockhart—father of the victim and grandfather of the young survivor—made the trip to Fredericksburg to seek out Kuhlmann.

“When he came to see me, he didn’t know my name,” she said, recalling how she was summoned to the EMS station to meet with him because he wanted to thank her for caring for his daughter and granddaughter.

“All those feelings I thought I’d put away on a shelf came flooding back. I was not really ready to deal with this, but I went to meet him anyway,” Kuhlmann said.

“He introduced himself. I said my name is Catherine and he said ‘my daughter’s name was Kathryn’ and I said, ‘I know.’ He just started crying,” she said.

“We hugged. He cried. I cried. And, we talked for what seemed like forever. I told him what I had promised Barbara Jean and he again cried. I knew if I ever got the chance to make good on my promise, there was no way I could turn it down,” Kuhlmann said.

After that meeting, he would send her pictures of his granddaughter from piano recitals, birthdays and other milestones in the girl’s life. Stock died a few years ago, but last year Kuhlmann looked up the family’s veterinarian business and began e-mailing Barbara Jean’s father.

“That was the start of fulfilling a promise I made on the side of the road to a scared, critically-injured little girl,” Kuhlmann said.

“I will say I sat down many, many times to write Barbara Jean a letter, but I never knew what to say,” she said.

In April, the Kuhlmanns received an email invitation to Banner’s commencement. Not long after that, she phoned to ask a question of Banner’s father, Brad, who lives in Merkel, near Abilene, some four hours from Fredericksburg.

Kuhlmann said she was taken aback when Banner herself answered the call—the once-frightened young girl, who has now grown into a young woman with plans to study medical science at Texas A&M University (following in both her parents’ footsteps).

They spoke of her impending milestone as a graduating senior. They also spoke of that day when so much was taken away.

“I told her I carry her picture inside my EMS helmet. I went on to explain how it grounds me,” Kuhlmann said.

“She told me that she still has the guardian angel pin I gave her in the hospital pinned to the stuffed animal in the Easter basket I brought,” she said.

“People always think our calls end once we hand off our patients,” Kuhlmann said. “Ten years later, we are just making a new chapter.”

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