1999 Honorable Mention Personal Narrative

My Brother Cried

I stand there shivering as tears stream down my face and roll onto my coat. I cannot believe she is really gone--she was only four months old. It is not fair to take her away from her family; she was only a baby. I listen as the bishop and the priest try to comfort our pain, but somehow they make it more of a grievous reality-- Stephanie is really gone. When the bishop finishes blessing the grave, I hear the echoes of Stephanie's anguish; "Don't take my baby away, I love her!" I ponder her words as they ring in my head; it makes me think, "Did I really love her?" I know I did, but at first I tried not to. I cry because of my heartlessness; Stephanie only needed love and attention while she existed on earth. As I watch her mother weep, I condemn myself--a terrible aunt. Despite my crude heart, I soon realize that Stephanie touched all of our lives, not just mine, in some way or another.

Stephanie Becomes Extremely Sick

Stephanie Christine Schank was born on a quiet, rainy Sunday in October. Immediately after church, my older brother Chris and I traveled over thirty miles north from Silver Spring, Maryland to Gaithersburg to see our newborn niece. Despite the familiar picturesque autumn scenery, we drove on Interstate 270 in dismal silence. We heard something might have gone wrong during the birth. Chris and I did not know what to expect. Upon arrival at Shady Grove Hospital, a nurse guided us to the Pediatric Intensive Care Unit. A million troubling thoughts raced through my mind. Could something possibly be wrong with the baby? No way! That would never happen to a righteous Mormon family. Why would God give a honorable family an affliction as serious as this? I never expected anything unfortunate to happen to my family or me, and especially not to my brother and his wife. I thought about Marisel, Stephanie's mother: perhaps she had a hard birth and the doctors needed specialists. I rationalized any possible problem and convinced myself that everything was fine.

Chris and I sat in painful silence as we waited patiently for someone to come answer our many questions. Finally, Mike, my oldest brother, and his home teacher strolled down the hallway. I assumed that Mike had taken him back to see Stephanie and Marisel. As they approached the waiting room, they were laughing together. I immediately got the impression that everything was absolutely fine (what a relief). Mike introduced me to his home teacher. I smiled and shook his hand pretending that I was paying attention to Mike's words, but I really was not concerned about who this stranger was. Interested only in the welfare of Stephanie and Marisel, I anxiously waited for the home teacher to leave.

When only the family members pervaded the circle in the waiting room, we finally were able to have our unresolved questions answered. Mike, sitting between Chris and me, explained that there were a few problems with the baby. Besides being premature, she was born with a hole in her heart and fluid surrounding her chest cavity. The doctors said that Stephanie was lucky to survive her birth. I instantly thought, "See, God loves us--Stephanie will be fine." Each of her doctors gave a hopeful prognosis, but they expressed cautious concern about the future condition of Stephanie's heart and physical activity. They knew that Stephanie would not be able to experience life as every other child would be able to. This innocent baby would not be able to play hopscotch with the other children at school. She would not be able to go out for recess and chase the boys. She would not even have the chance to be like any other child. She was missing out on the part of life that I valued the most.
Mike took Chris and me through a sterile maze to see Stephanie. As we walked through the white halls we approached the blue-green sign-- "Pediatric Intensive Care, Authorized Personnel Only." After the head nurse interrogated us with many security questions, she guided us back to Stephanie's new home. Stephanie lay on a pink blanket covering a metal tray. Her diaper looked so large on her shoebox-sized body. Tubes and wires flowed in and out of every end of her body. Her small eyes, closed so tightly, appeared to be glued shut. Even though she was entangled in chaos, I adored her; she was so beautiful, so pure, and so precious. I admit, not all pre-mature babies look normal, but she did. I later discovered why: Stephanie's chest cavity was swollen with fluid, giving her a richer color and a fuller frame. As I admired her, I noticed the nurse watching over our every move; her look reminded me of a museum tour guide, telling us not to touch the paintings. Despite her concerns, I touched Stephanie's hand and put my finger between hers. Stephanie did not respond at all-- she lay there motionless.

A few days later, the doctors discovered that her condition was much more serious. They realized first that she had an aneurism in her heart, causing major problems to her circulatory system. She was not getting proper blood flow. Doctors also uncovered that Stephanie had a rare disease-- chromosome translocation. This disease was so uncommon that its symptoms and treatments were not completely understood. However, the doctors knew enough to give Stephanie only a few days to live. She had many problems genetically, mentally, and physically. Her condition was too poor to be clarified as retardation or any other mental disease. Specialists also noticed a problem with her eyelids, but they never fully understood the problem. The doctors did know that she would not be able to open her eyes without a large amount of effort and pain. After knowing all of these complications on her life, the doctor's prognosis drastically changed, her condition was critical. Once I heard her life here would be short, I completely detached myself from her. I knew that I must not get to know her beauty because I usually become attached to small children. I realized it would be too hard on me to say goodbye to this angelic baby.

Keeping Busy to Avoid a Relationship with Stephanie

It was basketball season, the best season of the year. I had started for my high school basketball team four consecutive years. After school, I practiced and practiced until I physically dropped. Once I learned of the seriousness of Stephanie's disease, I focused my life around the basketball team even more. I was determined that this situation would not get me distracted from my athletic goals. My mother often invited me to accompany her on visits to see Stephanie in the hospital, but I usually squirmed out of going. I frequently came up with the excuse of basketball practice or homework. I had a structured life, nothing could distract me, not even by something as important as Stephanie's situation.

I cannot believe I was so heartless then. I do not doubt that Mike and Marisel needed all the emotional support that they could get, but I was not willing to sacrifice myself for them. My coach would often ask how things were going at home. I always told him that things were okay; never really telling him anything at all. I could never let him know about Stephanie-- pouring my heart out to my coach is not exactly a standard basketball practice. Actually, it surprised me that he cared enough to frequently ask about me. I knew that he was honestly concerned, but I could not tell him what was really going through my mind. I told myself that everything would work out because it made my life easier. One could easily say I was going through denial. Can you believe my insensitivity?

Stephanie Comes Home

Stephanie finally went to her new home in Gaithersburg, Maryland, after several weeks' stay in the hospital. She was hooked up to an intimidating ugly, sea green oxygen tank. Her tiny nose was filled with plastic tubes that pumped oxygen throughout her body to ease her breathing process. Despite her handicaps, she looked so peaceful just laying there. I could not help but imagine how painful her life must be. She often would stop...
breathing and every time she did, she was so strong; it seemed like she was determined to hang on just a little longer. Why should an innocent, little baby have to be so strong for all of those who loved her? We wanted her to stay here and grow up like her big brother; but I suppose she knew she must move on to accomplish the greater plan Heavenly Father had in store for her.

As I watched Stephanie rest, I couldn't tell if she was sleeping or if she was wide awake. Her eyes rarely opened; it was almost like she was blind to the world. When she did open her eyes, they cracked open only for a brief moment. Excitement filled our souls as she accomplished her most difficult task. This great feat resembled a first footstep of small child. After all the effort it took her to open her eyes, I often wondered if she could really see. If she could have a glimpse of her family, or even her mother, I think that made all the pain worthwhile.

**An Isolated Expression of Love**

Thanksgiving Day was the most important day in Stephanie's and my life: it was the first day I had ever held her. I was always so scared to touch her; I feared she might notice my feelings of unworthiness, and maybe she would resent me for that. As I reluctantly reached for her, I immediately felt her love. I sat there, with her in my arms and her tiny fingers wrapped around my index finger. Stephanie held on with all her might, as if she wanted to suck out my life for herself. As I stared at her, I noticed her beauty—so divine, like a perfect angel. I thought of how hard it would be on me when she would leave. I doubted I would be able to bear the pain of losing her. I remembered how I vowed I would never get close to her. As I sat there, I realized how selfish I was. How could I be so heartless to this sweet daughter of God? Stephanie and Marisel probably suffered the most, not me. I am so grateful I was able to share one memorable moment with my cherubic niece.

**Guilt at Her Death**

I had gone to basketball practice early one day because I wanted to shoot around before workout. As I walked from my car to the gym, my coach told me that his father just had a heart-attack and had passed on; practice would be canceled. I could not believe it. I knew that he was very close with his father—he often told the team about virtues his father had instilled in him. As I drove home in the cold, wet rain, I could not help but think about my coach. I imagined all the possible thoughts and fears that must have flooded his mind. I presume he went through a more difficult situation than mine because it would be harder to lose someone you have grown to love with all your heart.

Despite the circumstances, I was somewhat glad I didn't have practice—I had a ton of homework which was all due the next day. Once I got home, I prepared some nachos and put them in the oven to bake. As I sat down to read the mail, the phone rang—it was my mother, calling from work. She sounded frantic, and had a difficult time talking to me. Once she started speaking, she told me that she had talked to my counselor and teachers. What?! Why would she have a need to talk to my counselor and teachers? Why? I quickly became frustrated as she confusingly tried to avoid any subject. I told her to spit it out. Surprisingly enough, she did. She confessed, "Stephanie died an hour ago."

My mind stopped. What? I could not believe what I was hearing; she was not supposed to die, not now. What was I going to do? I sat there in silence. Shortly after, my mom picked me up and drove me to Mike and Marisel's house. On our way over, I wondered why she thought I might need a counselor. I thought that I hid my true feelings behind my callous disposition. Obviously, she knew me better than I thought and recognized how much this would upset me.

***************

It took a minute or two for someone to answer the door. I stood out in the cold, waiting patiently, just thinking of what Mike and Marisel must have been going through. It was not possible for me to comprehend the grief...
they would experience. The greeter opened the door; I did not recognize her face. I later discovered that she was Stephanie's nurse. She often stayed with Stephanie and Marisel during the day to make sure Stephanie was still breathing and to give support to Marisel. The pronouncement of Stephanie's death must have been a traumatic experience for her, especially when she had to tell Marisel her that her daughter was gone. I could not even imagine the hardships the nurse often experiences.

Once we stepped inside, I noticed the house was in perfect condition-- it appeared spotless and clean. I walked into the living room, it seemed so dark and solemn. I looked over, where she lay, there was Stephanie. She looked perfect in her bassinet. She did not have any tubes feeding into her body, she resembled simple beauty. As my eyes rested on her tiny body, I imagined her in heaven. She probably sat on Jesus' lap, hugging him for as long as she could. She most likely could see, and awed at all the beauties around her and I think she may have even looked down on us. I just know she loves it there and that she is waiting patiently for her family to come join her. Stephanie finally achieved perfection.

It seemed like we sat on the living room couch for hours. I just sat there, imagining what was going on in my brother's mind. I noticed the sadness in his voice. He was strong though, I think that he knew he had to be for Marisel. I just sat and watched his every move. He intrigued me. I never saw Mike upset or frustrated before; so I just wanted to know how he would react to this horrible situation. He was Marisel's hero, she needed him to be there for her to cry on-- he was. I tried to be helpful, but the difficult, depressing situation made it hard. Instead, I laid their in silence, not thinking at all. I could not believe that little Stephanie was really gone from our lives.

Several hours later, the mortician arrived with a dark and shiny mahogany baby casket. The small box was no longer than my arm. Can you imagine a baby fitting into such a tiny thing? The mortician sat the casket on the table and stepped back. Mike came into the room with lifeless little Stephanie in his arms. As he bent over to lay her into the casket, he started to cry. He pulled her near his chest and kissed her. I had never seen my brother cry. Tears were streaming down his face, I think it hit him, just as it hit us all. Once I saw Mike cry, I felt awful because it hurt me that such a wonderful father was in so much pain. I could not take it anymore, I slipped out of the room and cried. All I felt was shame and sadness. I was an awful aunt, so mean, so cold, so horrible. I should have become close to her, and showed her how precious she really was. I did love her, but I never expressed it. Honestly, I never thought that I would be this way. I was ashamed of myself for not allowing her in my heart, for turning my back on her when she needed me the most, and for denying her illness. I thought that in the long run this would protect me from feeling sad when the day came; obviously it did not work. I cried and cried. Chris came up behind me and tried to calm me down, but I was hurting so badly it did not seem to help. I silently prayed on his shoulder, I prayed for her forgiveness. I realized that I truly did love her with all my heart. I knew her sweet soul helped us all, but most of all she helped me see the true meaning of love. I am sorry, I truly love you, Stephanie!