

## My O.T. Story

### Healing through a Story: How Occupational Therapy Creates Meaning through the Grief Process

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**Prologue:** The beginnings of this Expo project are rooted in a story that started nearly five years ago on a Sunday. My sophomore year of college, I had the opportunity to join my church in caring for a special needs baby in our nursery. For the next three years, I had the privilege of spending one-on-one time each Sunday with Eiris Schneider, my little best friend. Eiris was a foster baby with significant brain damage that adversely affected her eyesight, speech, organ functions, and independent bodily movement – the doctors gave her a lifetime prognosis of one year, but she defied those odds and was a miracle. My short time with Eiris not only created the passion that I have for OT, but also demonstrated the goodness of the Lord and the beauty and value He places on each and every life. Sadly, Eiris went to be with her Lord last March due to significant health complications. It is evident that her loss has had the biggest impact on her mother, Kathryn. That is why for this Expo Project, I wanted to write a children's book that shared Eiris' powerful story, and use the writing process as a means of grief therapy for Kathryn. The idea for this project was inspired by my special relationship with Eiris and her adoptive mother Kathryn. It is my hope that by collaborating with Kathryn to create a children's book that shares Eiris' story, she may find healing from grief as we honor the memory of her precious little one. As a single mother, Kathryn has pursued the life calling of loving on children in the foster care system and becoming their family through eventual

adoption. Islah, now nine years old, found her forever home with Kathryn when she was just a baby, and was soon joined by Eiris as an adoptive little sister. This past summer, Kathryn has invited two more little ones into her home and is planning on making them forever family as well. In March, it was one year since Eiris' passing, which made this project timely in regards to remembrance and celebrating a life that was so dear. For Kathryn, it is my prayer that this project not only served as a memorial for Eiris, but also as medium through which we can continue to champion the sanctity of life for all, despite disability or age. That is something that Kathryn has fought for in each of her girl's lives, as well as for her students as a special education teacher in our local public school system. Her personal story, along with Eiris' story is a powerful one.

### **Chapter One – Once Upon A Time**

Since Eiris' passing last March, I have maintained a relationship with Kathryn and her sweet family. We celebrated Eiris' life through a memorial service and continued to relive her story through pictures and fond memories throughout the spring. This past summer, I joined Kathryn in welcoming two new little ones into her home as foster children. Kathryn and Islah became loving caretakers once again as they selflessly gave their time and resources to create a home for Willa and Amie. When the theme of this year's Expo was announced as "O.T. Stories," I immediately knew of a story worth sharing and one that I could enter into as an occupational therapy student to aid in the healing process. In December, I asked Kathryn if she would be interested in writing a book with me about Eiris. Her response was that she "couldn't think of a greater gift than speaking [Eiris]' story, which is very much His story for us." With that, we started brainstorming on how we could adequately illustrate the powerful story of Eiris' life. The book moved from a dream to reality as we met each week to work on the project.

### **Chapter Two – The Princess and the Pea**

We began this book writing journey by discussing expectations and developing a vision. I thought this part of the process would be the hardest to jumpstart on; however, Kathryn had already established a theme for this book and was eager to pursue it. She wanted to use the writing process to not only share Eiris' story, but to also thank Eiris for what she taught us about the sanctity of life, the power of love, and the goodness of the Lord while on this earth. The book would be written through the eyes of Kathryn, as she shared intimate moments with her "Princess and the Pea." The book took its own form of a children's book, as it details the

worth of a soul despite physical or cognitive limitation, the impact the love of a family can have on an individual, and how the Lord is omnipotent over all. Each page would start with the phrase “Thank you, Eiris...” as we chronicled the gift she was to Kathryn and Islah’s lives.

### **Chapter Three – It Takes a Village**

Each meeting was held at Kathryn’s home, which meant that Islah, Willa, and Amie soon found their own way to contribute to the writing process. It was evident from our first meeting that Islah so desired to share her own experience with Eiris within the book. Within that meeting, Kathryn and I agreed that the project would become a collaborative effort. I presented Kathryn and Islah with journals in which to document memories of Eiris that came to mind within the next couple of weeks. We would use these treasured memories to create the story of the book. During this process, I also took the time to have a discussion with Kathryn about the stages of grief and how this project would aid within her and Islah’s healing process.

### **Chapter Four – Fairest of Them All**

Once we had decided on the text we wanted to use within the book, we created a storyboard with which we organized the pictures we wanted to illustrate the pages. Kathryn and Islah narrowed hundreds of pictures down into a handful, each still holding a myriad of memories with Eiris. At this point in the process, I decided that it would be meaningful for Willa and Amie to contribute to the book. I loved having pictures for the illustrations, but I felt like we needed a touch more to the pages. Kathryn and I decided that we would have Willa and Amie finger paint background pages in Kathryn and Islah’s favorite colors. Since the pages in the book alternated between quotes from Kathryn and Islah, this was the perfect touch. Willa and Amie are a part of Eiris’ story even though they never knew her. Without Eiris, Kathryn would not have the continued passion to pursue the needs of children within foster care, or to eventually adopt them as her own. Soon, Willa and Amie will share the title of sister to Eiris as Kathryn pursues adoption. As they group up, they will see their own story through this book project and how the Lord weaves all of our stories together in beautiful ways. For all of us, truly are the “fairest of them all” in His eyes.

### **Chapter Five - Current Status**

At this time, the book has been completed and I am in the process of pursuing publishing options for Kathryn. We are not sure who all will be wanting a copy of the book, but we do want

to make it available to her family and closest friends. I will have at least one copy prepared for my Expo presentation and will work out how to provide more copies to those interested after the event.

## **Chapter Six - The Story Continues: Happily Ever After**

Eiris' story does not end with the completion of this book. I trust that her influence will continue to reach others as her legacy is shared by her family and through my work as an OT. The finished product was presented to Kathryn and her girls as a keepsake to cherish in the coming years. Willa and Amie can grow up reading about their big sister

## **Appendix A – Acknowledgements**

Thank you, Kathryn, for jumping enthusiastically into this project with me. You had an absolutely beautiful vision for this book and I am so thankful for the experience I shared in writing it with you. You continue to inspire me daily.

Islah, thank you for adding some magic to the formatting of this book, as you shared treasured memories and ideas to make it a work personal to you and your mom. You always will be the best big sister to Eiris.

Thank you, Willa and Amie, for adding an artistic flare to the pages of this memoir. You too, are a part of Eiris' story and it is my prayer that you all grow up knowing the impact Eiris left on this world.

Eiris, thank you for being my best friend. The beauty and meaning of this project would not have existed without you. My own "OT Story" is dedicated to you.

Thank you, Jil & Christy, for seeing purpose in this project and supporting me to pursue it. The whole process has already made me a better future OT.

## **Appendix B – Contact Information**

If you would like to learn more about what went into the process of writing this book, or if you are interest in more information on how OTs can be impactful during the grief process, you can contact me at [FCCambron@my.milligan.edu](mailto:FCCambron@my.milligan.edu) or through phone at 423-557-4036.