

## The Dees Family

In 1995, Julie Dees was ill – very ill – and no one knew what to do. She and husband Brian Dees aggressively sought answers from doctors throughout Texas. Apparently, Julie had contracted a parasite while on a family vacation and had lost complete function of her large intestine. One thing that doctors did advise – if the couple wanted children, Julie needed to give birth before the invasive surgery to remove her large intestine.

And that they did. Brian and Julie welcomed their first son, Parker, in June of 1998 and their second son, Hudson, in March of 2000. “We were thrilled to have children. But they were both very difficult pregnancies, and I was really quite sick after the second birth.”

In April of 2001, Julie had her large intestine removed. “Things seemed fine until December of 2001, when I started having blockage in my small intestine,” said Julie. She has since had 10 small bowel blockage surgeries, leaving only half of her small intestine intact. “I continued to be in and out of hospitals about eight weeks a year, with an average of one to two surgeries per year. And I continued to have bleeding in my small intestine that couldn’t be stopped,” she said. Doctors were stumped.

In January 2006, Julie had to be revived on the operating table. Julie and Brian were stricken with facing the reality and possibility of Julie’s death. Up to that point, they had not explained anything to then six-year-old Parker and five-year-old Hudson, except for telling them that “Mommy’s tummy is sick.” They knew they now had to communicate the problem to their children. The boys began reacting to their parent’s stress and sadness through anger and sleepless nights.



*Photo courtesy of Bill Bastas.*

In October 2006, Julie went to the Mayo Clinic. Finally, after 10 years of seeking answers from so many doctors about her disease, she had received not one, but two diagnoses. “I found out that I have Crohn’s Disease and Erythropoietin Anemia,” says Julie. “Both are incurable and require daily medications, weekly blood tests, and treatments for the rest of my life.” The drugs and treatments have caused numerous other health and organ problems, all needing treatments or surgeries.

Julie and Brian knew they needed help for themselves and their children. They diligently interviewed two child psychologists. Hudson and Parker reacted poorly to the situation, and neither of the psychologists worked out. “We had previously heard great things about Wonders & Worries, but assumed – since it was a free program – it was for low-income families only and we wouldn’t qualify,” she says. “When I received a pamphlet about it from Texas Oncology, I saw that wasn’t the case. The program is accessible to anyone in need.” That’s when the Dees family found a home at Wonders & Worries.

“Wonders & Worries has turned our lives around,” says Julie. “Parker and Hudson immediately met with Child Life Specialist Kim Fryar, who made the boys feel very comfortable and right at home. After the first session with Kim the boys left beaming.”

A wave of peace and relief washed over Brian and Julie, knowing their children’s needs were finally being met. The young boys now had the tools to begin understanding and coping with their mother’s illness.

“Kim used a hands-on digestive kit to demonstrate which organs I was missing and how my body was different from theirs. When I had surgery to have a Port-a-Cath inserted into my chest for treatments, the boys played with a doll that had the same port,” says Julie. “I was with them during these sessions, and it was amazing!”

“Wonders & Worries works to ensure that counseling is age-appropriate for each child,” she said. “We can now openly discuss my illness and treatments with our children, and their anxiety has significantly decreased.”

Wonders & Worries teaches children how to recognize and express their emotions through games and activities. “Now I hear them say things like, ‘I’m frustrated’ or ‘I’m confused.’ It has changed things dramatically.”

Julie will battle this disease for the rest of her life. “I don’t know what the future holds for me,” she says. “But I do know that Wonders & Worries will be there to contribute to our quality of life and greater peace of mind.”