

A Tattoo Tribute

A Mother's Love

by Liz Holzemer

Cheryl Haggard doesn't look like the typical client you'd see walking into a downtown Denver tattoo parlor. On the day I met her—dressed in a stylish emerald green boho skirt, black cowboy boots and jean jacket, the 38-year-old Evergreen mother looked more like she was on her way to a fashion photo shoot.

Don't underestimate the strength of this petite mom on an unlikely mission.

"Never ever in my life would I have dreamed of getting a tattoo," Cheryl recently admitted.

Cheryl knew she could withstand the pain of a few needles. She was doing this for her son, Maddux, on his first birthday. Cheryl instructed the tattoo artist to etch a classic Winnie the Pooh Bear and angel wings with M-A-D-D-U-X spelled out underneath her C-section scar.

Maddux will never see his mother's loving tribute to him. He died in February 2005, six days after he entered the hearts and lives of Cheryl, his dad, Mike, and his older sisters, Anna and Natalie, and big brother, Chase.

"I never felt much movement with Maddux," she recounts, "but he was breach and I was told quite large." After his birth, doctors whisked Maddux away to the neonatal intensive care unit for six agonizing days. During that time, Cheryl knew what she had to do.

So taken by the beautiful family portraits hanging outside of her hospital room, she rang Littleton photographer and Expressions owner, Sandy Puc'. "When she dropped everything on her plate and rushed down to Presbyterian Saint Luke's, I couldn't help but think, 'Is this woman a starving artist ambulance chaser?'" Haggard laughs now.

Puc' spent that evening capturing Maddux's final breaths on film. Within moments of his death, she continued shooting, but this time with Cheryl and Mike cradling their son.

"I wanted to have these memories with my son," Cheryl said. "My entire home is filled with pictures of my children and I needed Maddux to be in the center of them."

The Haggard's grieved Maddux's loss and in a remarkable short amount of time—six weeks to be exact, an idea overtook Cheryl. "Every night Maddux was alive, I recited the *Now I Lay Me Down To Sleep* prayer to him," she said. "A higher source just guided me."

On April 8, Cheryl and Sandy celebrated the one-year anniversary of *Now I Lay Me Down To Sleep*, www.nilmdts.org, a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization, which they co-founded. In just one year, 500 national and international photographers have captured the images of over 200 children who've died. The photographers like Puc', donate their time and present the treasured pictures on a DVD at no cost to the families.



"What is truly amazing is how quickly this has grown," Cheryl said. "Not a day goes by when I don't speak with Sandy about another family that needs us."

Cheryl blogs daily on her website's support forum, www.nowisleep.com, from her home office, which is lovingly set up in Maddux's room. Her outpouring of emotion and feelings are what keep Cheryl sane.

"After Maddux died, I shut myself off from everyone," she recounts. "Losing Maddux was the darkest day of my life; I wish it had been me who had died that day. One day I was lying on the couch with my kids and I thought, 'What I do today and every day will affect and shape my kids for the rest of their lives.' It was a defining moment for me." Now, Cheryl considers every day a blessing.

Maddux will always feel his family's love. "He's the reason I still exist," Cheryl says.

