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"I felt I had to do something to help other families cope with this terrible disease, so I joined the Tug McGraw Foundation."

Genesis HealthCare CFO Jim McKeon and son Jimmy.

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Heroes: Liz Holzemer

Sometimes, you just have to laugh. Just ask Liz Holzemer.

Fans of *The Late Show with David Letterman* can appreciate this brain tumor survivor's off-center and self-deprecating sense of humor. A mother and freelance writer, Liz hopes to someday achieve her goal of delivering her own "Top Ten Blonde and Brain-Impaired Jokes" on his show.

But when first faced with the diagnosis of a meningioma, a benign but often debilitating brain tumor...she wasn't laughing.

It was February of 2000. Liz, a seemingly healthy and attractive 32-year-old, and her husband, a major league pitcher for the Philadelphia Phillies, had been trying unsuccessfully to conceive a child for over a year. While doctors dismissed their difficulties as simply hormonal or stress-related, Liz remained concerned and persisted for a more complete diagnosis.

"My cycles had altogether ceased," said Liz. "Despite battery after battery of tests, doctors were unable to determine the cause of my infertility. Eventually, I was told my ovulatory capacity had prematurely shut down."

Liz continued to ask the doctors about other possibilities. Finally, after experiencing frequent migraines and hearing "swishing" sounds in her ears, she convinced her doctors to perform an MRI (magnetic resonance imaging) scan of her brain.

"I was exasperated, and I needed to know if this would provide an answer, the missing piece of the puzzle," said Liz. "I would not rest easy until I had pursued my gut feeling – that something was terribly wrong."

The results left her and her husband stunned. The brain scan discovered a baseball-sized tumor pressing against her optic nerve, carotid artery, and sinus cavity. In short, she was only days from slipping into a coma and possibly death. According to her doctors, she had



Liz Holzemer is pictured here with her husband Mark, who co-owns and runs [Slammers Baseball training facility](#) in Lakewood, Colorado.



Liz and Mark Holzemer live life to the fullest with their two "miracle" children, Hannah (far right) and Hunter (at left).

raise awareness through her nonprofit organization, **Meningioma Mommas**. Her self-penned book titled *Curveball: When Life Throws You a Brain Tumor* shares what she has learned through her personal journey and is scheduled for publication in the spring of 2007.

"It is so easy to be intimidated by someone in a white coat," said Liz, clearly speaking from experience. "I try to be an advocate for women; women don't always put themselves first." She encourages women to always take a list of questions when visiting their doctors and to always, ALWAYS, listen to their inner voice. "We need to take care of ourselves – and not feel guilty about it."

Three or four new members join Meningioma Mommas every day, including an increasing number of men. Liz hopes to help both patients and caregivers find the needed information and support they seek, and she is particularly proud of the way recovering patients are helping others that are newly diagnosed and anticipating surgery. She is quick to note, however, that surgery is much more the beginning of the healing process – not the end.



"It's not over when the tumor is removed," she explains. "It's also what follows. When you need an ear to listen, a shoulder to cry on."

Pictured from left: Marilyn, Darcie, Lizzyjo, Mlee, Rennie, Sandy, Liz Holzemer, Grossvail, Kate, Tracie, and (kneeling in center) Executive Director Lindy Klarenbeek.

In addition to its efforts in awareness and support, Meningioma Mommas is currently funding a study to examine the link between hormones and meningioma tumors. Reportedly 65% of those diagnosed with these tumors are women, with most cases appearing in menopausal women. According to Liz, there are a significantly high number of women with brain tumors who have previously confronted other "female-related" diseases such as breast cancer, uterine fibroids, and thyroid issues. Liz herself had a tumor removed from her breast in 1997 and was later diagnosed with Hashimoto's disease. (Hashimoto's disease impacts the thyroid gland and its ability to successfully produce hormones.)

As for what lies ahead, Liz can't help but remain positive. "I should have gone blind," she utters almost offhandedly as she helps her son Hunter get dressed. "I should have been paralyzed. I should have died. I've had two brain surgeries. Now, I have two wonderful children and my work as both a writer and an advocate for meningioma survivors."

Her eyes gleam with realization. "A brain tumor is not a death sentence; for me, it was a life sentence," said Liz. "I have the rest of my life to make an impact."

Then the survivor and her son, Hunter – her “miracle” man – head out for an afternoon at the park.

For more about Meningioma Mommas and their work, visit their website. (www.meningiomamommas.org)

To read another inspiring "Heroes" story involving Jimmy McKeon, please [click here](#).

To read another inspiring "Heroes" story involving Shawna Oleson, please [click here](#).

To read another inspiring "Heroes" story involving Denis McDowell, please [click here](#).