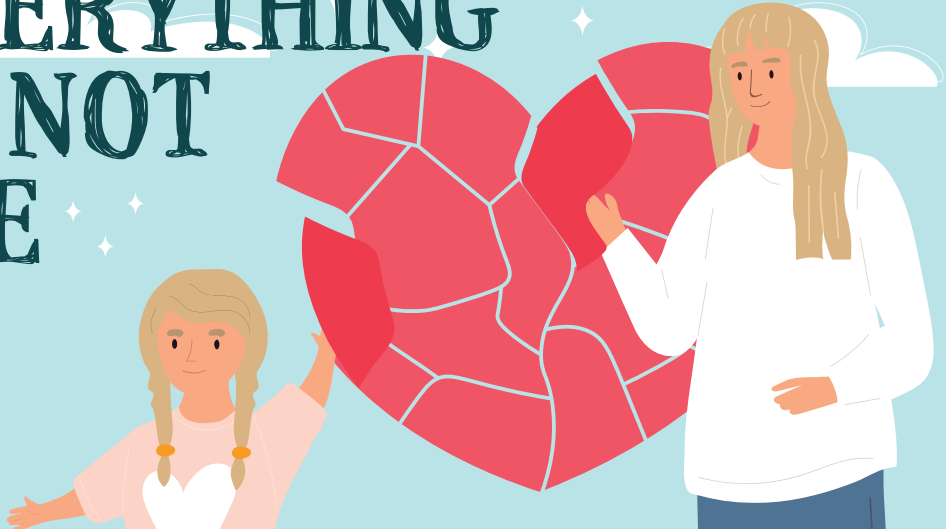


WE DID EVERYTHING WE COULD NOT TO BE HERE



A study in the *Journal of the American Medical Association Pediatrics* in September of 2022 estimates that across the globe, 10.5 million children have had a parent or kinship caregiver die of COVID-19. While many countries including the US are moving into a new phase of living with COVID-19, the reality of these losses continues to sink in for the children, teens, partners spouses and others left behind. Lissa Mumford and her four children are one of these families. Lissa's husband Bryce and father to their four children died of COVID-19 in December of 2021. Lissa spent weeks traveling between their hometown in northern Utah to the hospital in Salt Lake City, where Bryce was receiving treatment. While she was traveling between home and the hospital, Lissa did everything she could to keep her kids informed about their dad's health, and to answer their questions honestly. We spoke with Lissa in August of 2022. What follows are excerpts from our conversation.

This is an excerpt of Dougy Center's Grief Out Loud Podcast, Episode 233. To listen to the full interview with Lissa Mumford and to access our collection of resources for children, teens, and their family members grieving a death due to COVID-19, please visit dougycenter.org/covid.



I really tried to answer their questions and be honest with them. I didn't keep secrets.

On what it was like being married to Bryce...

Always fun. We had a lot of friends and family that would talk about how the first year of marriage was so hard or such an adjustment, but we never felt that. He was a really wonderful, attentive husband. He would surprise me with really thoughtful gifts, surprise getaways. He'd come home early from work and shoo me out of the door to go have a massage or send me flowers just because. I mean, 13 years, I don't think anybody's married for 13 years without facing challenges of some kind. But our relationship was never one of those.

On Bryce getting COVID...

We actually all had it as a family at the same time. We had it very, very mild compared to him. I was worried about him, but I wasn't overly concerned. He and I were both fully vaccinated. Bryce had a lot of health struggles — over the years he had three kidney transplants. He had sepsis six times. He had over a dozen stays in the ICU over the course of our marriage. Dozens of other surgeries and procedures throughout

those years. So I was very familiar with hospital time, even ICU time. And he had been very, very sick before, but always fought through it and came home to us. I was worried but not overly concerned.

On the progression of Bryce's COVID-19 illness...

There were a lot of ups and downs. He was sick at home with COVID for about a week, 10 days, before it got bad enough that we needed to go to the hospital. When we first went it was just to our local hospital in our city where we were, and they have an ICU but not a COVID ICU. I think it really shifted for me when they had to intubate him after two days and because their hospital didn't have the ability to have a patient on a long-term vent, he was LifeFlighted down to another hospital. And I think seeing him leave on that LifeFlight helicopter was when they got more real.

On talking with their four young kids about how their dad was doing...

I really tried to answer their questions and be honest with them. I didn't keep secrets. I didn't withhold information, but I also didn't want to give them too much information and freak them out. So, I would keep things surface like, "He's been a little bit more awake today." Or "They're worried about his liver today." "They're doing some more tests. And we'll know more tomorrow," those kinds of things. I really went back and forth about them seeing him over FaceTime, particularly when I thought he was going to get better. But they started asking and saying they wanted to see him. And he had been in there long enough that I felt like they had an idea of how sick he was and that maybe by not showing them their dad, their imaginations were making it worse than it actually was. At least if they see it their imagination doesn't have to run wild.

On sharing the news with their kids that Bryce was going to die...

Bryce started to slowly improve. He was transitioned out of the COVID ICU and went to a transitional ICU. They took him off the vent, they weaned him off the sedation, and he was a little more awake and alert. That was on a Friday, and I came home to spend the weekend with the kids. We were hoping that he would be in a skilled nursing facility closer to home by

I felt this need to almost walk around the hospital with a sticker on that said, 'We were vaccinated, I promise. We did everything we could to not be here.'

Christmas and everybody was so excited. And then I was woken at three o'clock in the morning by a phone call from the ICU that his heart had stopped, he was having some seizures, and they weren't sure what was going on. I had gotten alarming phone calls from the ICU doctors before and I'd had to rush back to Salt Lake from home and by the time I got there, things were fine. But I got down to Salt Lake and he was not better. I called my brother and said, "Whenever the kids wake up in the morning, I want you to bring them down." They got there the next morning, and because of COVID, kids weren't allowed in the hospital at all unless they were patients. They did make an exception for us and let the kids come into the hospital, but they had to sit in the foyer outside of the secure ICU door. I told them that their dad had fought really hard for a really long time and that COVID had been too much for his body. It was tired and broken and his body couldn't do it anymore. And he was going to die. There were a lot of tears, understandably. Lots of yelling. There were some angry outbursts. There was some denial. They all kept asking to see him, but they weren't allowed in the ICU. The hospital opened a meditation room. We went in there and did a FaceTime and each of the kids got to say goodbye to him. It's not a conversation that anyone's ever really ready for, but I knew that it needed to come from me. I hope it gave them the sense that we were in this together, that I wasn't afraid to talk about it. I'm not scared of their grief, and I didn't want them to feel isolated, or like they couldn't talk to me about things.

On the stigma that can come with COVID-19...

We were in an area where a lot of people are unvaccinated and didn't believe either that COVID was real or that vaccines would work and be helpful. I felt this need to almost walk around the hospital with

It's hard to have your loved one's cause of death in the news. You want to focus on their life and who they were when they were here.

a sticker on that said, "We were vaccinated, I promise. We did everything we could to not be here." I did have a couple of people that reached out to me, when they found out he [Bryce] was in the hospital with COVID, and they didn't believe that COVID was real. They said some really hurtful things. They blamed me for him being sick and being in the hospital. And I just was like, look, no one wants him to get better more than I do. I promise you. It's really awful to watch this person that you know is happy and joyful and full of life and kind and warm just wasting away like that. I am making the best decision that I feel like I can for the person that I love the most. You do enough second guessing of your decisions and you do plenty of blame and the "what if?" game in your own mind. You don't need other people to play that out for you and put that on you.

On what it's meant to have her husband die of COVID-19...

It's hard, he was so much more than how he died. It's easy for society at large to just look at the sheer

number of COVID deaths, and just be like, "Wow, that's a lot. That's a really big number." But if you were to see one million hash marks, it is so much more impactful. I try to remember that each one of those million is a hash mark and each hash mark has left a hole, a wake, a path of devastation, the size that Bryce left, which is massive.

It's triggering, obviously, to have your loved one's cause of death be in the news and a near constant topic of conversation. When Bryce was in the hospital, there were billboards all over our state, showing "patients" intubated and in the ICU, encouraging people to get vaccinated. It was kind of hard to see those because Bryce was actually intubated, and in the ICU. Also, it being in the news, it's brought a lot of questions from my kids, you know, they see billboards, they see signs in people's yards. They hear kids talking about it at school, at recess. There's been some blaming themselves for bringing COVID home from school, even though we don't know where we got it. So, we've had a lot of conversations about things that my kids probably would have just kept inside for years. And like I said, it's hard to have your loved one's cause of death in the news. You want to focus on their life and who they were when they were here. You don't want to dwell on their death, but when you see and hear reminders every day about the way they died, instead of how they lived, that can be really hard to do.



The mission of Dougy Center is to provide grief support in a safe place where children, teens, young adults, and their families can share their experiences before and after a death. We provide support and training locally, nationally, and internationally to individuals and organizations seeking to assist children who are grieving.

dougy.org • help@dougy.org • 503.775.5683



This resource was funded by the Brave of Heart Fund, founded by the Foundations of New York Life and Cigna and administered by E4E Relief. The Brave of Heart Fund was established in 2020 to provide charitable grants and emotional support services to families of the frontline healthcare workers, volunteers, and support staff whose lives were lost in the fight against COVID-19. It continues to offer support to these bereaved families via partnerships with non-profit organizations aligned with the fund's core purposes.

employeerelieffund.org/brave-of-heart-fund