

# In Memory of BRANDIE

A local family starts a foundation to help others facing cancer

By Heather Johnson Durocher

Doctors didn't sugarcoat Melissa Willman's breast cancer prognosis. After eight years of remission, the 35-year-old mom of two faced an especially aggressive form of the disease, and she could have anywhere between six months to two years to live.

"My doctors told us to make this the best Christmas ever because it may be my last," Willman, of Traverse City, recalled of the health news her family received late last year.

The Willman family followed this advice, and Melissa said she can't say enough about the dedication of a local foundation for helping make the holidays truly memorable. She'll never forget how Liz Courtad, co-director of the Brandie

"You'd get to know people, and people struggled with getting to treatments, with cooking for themselves," she said. "There's a lot of concern on my part for that single mom who has to get home and feed her kids all alone after getting chemo treatment."

It was this concern that grew into a plan of reaching out to those fighting cancer, to provide education and support as well as advocate for prevention and early detection. The family decided to start the Brandie Rose Foundation to accomplish these goals and today offers these services free of charge, along with emotional and social support to assist cancer patients, caretakers and their family and friends.

"I want cancer patients to know we're here," Courtad said. "It's really incredible to me how word of mouth can spread, but I know there's got to be a lot of people we're not reaching, whom we're not touching yet."

Melissa Willman learned of the Brandie Rose Foundation through her church. Having lost her job in the midst of chemotherapy and other treatments, Melissa and her husband Dave were struggling to cover child-care costs for daughters, Faith, 5, and Haley, 4, on one income. Paying for trips to the Mayo Clinic and navigating the maze of health insurance was proving difficult as well.

By connecting with the foundation, the Willmans have found much needed support.

"Liz helped me with finding aid for daycare," Willman said. "She's very compassionate and caring and wants to help. It's really a godsend."

Courtad said she is thrilled to be helping other women who are going through much of what her daughter-in-law experienced. The foundation is also a family affair: Brandie's mother, Debbie Bates, is co-director of the foundation, and Brandie's 13-year-old daughter, Nicole Kluth, serves as the teen advisor for the non-profit. Nicole recently shared her mom's story on the website [www.tamikaandfriends.org](http://www.tamikaandfriends.org) and told how she has received the HPV vaccination as a means of preventing cervical cancer.

"I know that my mom was worried I would get cervical cancer when I



Photography by Scarlett

The Brandie Rose Foundation is a family affair: Brandie's mother, Debbie Bates (left) and mother-in-law, Liz Courtad (right) are co-directors of the foundation, while Brandie's 13-year-old daughter, Nicole Kluth, serves as the teen advisor for the non-profit.

grew up," she wrote for the site. "So in January my grandma took me to the doctor to get the HPV vaccine, Gardasil. I would encourage all young women to be vaccinated so that someday others will not have to go through what we went through, what my mom went through."

Family and friends remember Brandie Courtad as a woman with a strong spirit and zest for life.

"She was a most incredible mom," said Tim Tate, a family friend who met Brandie when she was a teenager in a Bible class he taught. His business, Tate's Auto Body, is a supporter of the foundation. "She only had one daughter, and Nicole is an incredible young lady because of her mom. She was a one-of-a-kind mom: a very, very happy person with an infectious laugh."

"She just sparkled," agreed Courtad. "She was one of those people you wanted to be around. You wanted to do things for her and please her. She was so full of life."

"We didn't think, nor did she, that she would die because she had such a strong will to live," Courtad added. "She fought like crazy. I will never admire anyone more than Brandie because of her fight to live. She fought very hard to stay here for Nicole. It was just not conceivable that she was going to leave

her daughter."

Brandie Courtad's family has big dreams for the foundation.

"My ultimate goal is to have a Brandie Rose Center somewhere near the hospital," Courtad said. "It would be providing emotional support for cancer patients."

**The Brandie Rose Foundation will hold a golf outing fundraiser on Sept. 13 at The Crown Golf Course in Traverse City. For details or to donate to the foundation, visit [www.brandierose.org](http://www.brandierose.org).**

Along with making phone calls, researching potential resources and filling out paperwork, Courtad is there for Melissa and her family just to talk.

"She always knows when to call," Willman said. "I don't know what I'd be doing without the foundation and Liz."

**"There were four of us sitting there when Brandie was getting chemo, but not everybody got that kind of support."**

Rose Foundation, sent a stunningly beautiful Christmas centerpiece and other thoughtful gifts to her family of four.

"It was just really special," Willman said. "Liz has been like my guardian angel. She really has."

Liz Courtad knows well what life looks like when cancer is taking its toll. She was loyally there for her daughter-in-law, Brandie Courtad, when she endured treatments for cervical cancer. Brandie, a married mother of one daughter, lost her three-year battle with the disease on July 2, 2007, at the age of 30.

"As a family, we spent a tremendous amount of time in doctors' offices, infusion clinics, and made several visits out to the Mayo Clinic," Courtad said. "As we got to know other cancer patients, it became so obvious to me that not everyone has wide support like Brandie did. There were four of us sitting there when Brandie was getting chemo, but not everybody got that kind of support."

Courtad's heart broke looking around those rooms, she said.