

This is the story of love and loss and heartbreak; of hope, redemption and legacy. This is the story of how one little boy's brief life has helped to better his community.

Luke David Nelson was born Monday, February 6, 2006—the day after the Pittsburgh Steelers won Super Bowl XL against the Seattle Seahawks. My husband, David, is a lifelong Pittsburgh Steelers fan, and throughout my pregnancy we had been joking that I would probably end up going into labor during the Super Bowl if the Steelers were playing. My labor did in fact begin before the big game began, but my water didn't break until after the Steelers had pulled out a victory.



Luke David Nelson
2/6/06-5/3/06

Luke entered the world the following evening, after a long labor, via cesarean section. I honestly don't remember much of Luke's arrival into the world once we were in the operating room—just waking up in recovery.

When Luke was born, I was working and taking classes at Washburn University to get my teaching certificate in Music Education. My husband, David, was a Firefighter/A-EMT with the Junction City Fire Department. I took the standard 6 weeks of maternity leave and returned to work and school in mid-March. We had interviewed and selected a local, licensed, at home day care provider to care for Luke prior to his birth.

On May 1, 2006 Luke sounded congested and seemed to be a little under the weather. I made an appointment with our family practice provider. When I arrived at our daycare to pick Luke up for our appointment, it was nap time. The daycare provider went to wake Luke and brought him to me. He had been put to sleep bundled in a blanket and felt excessively warm. I had a passing thought to mention this to our daycare provider but was in a rush to make our appointment with our family practice doctor. I let it go. At our appointment, the physician did not seem too concerned about Luke's congestion, said it was normal for young babies to be a little congested, but he did give us a liquid antihistamine to give him in case seasonal allergies were at play, too.

On May 2nd, Luke had a slight fever, still seemed a little congested and not feeling great. I took the day off from school and work to stay home with him. That evening, David and I put Luke in the truck and took a drive through the pasture behind our house.

Wednesday, May 3rd, was David's shift day at the fire station. He left for work and I got Luke and I ready for daycare and work. I dropped him off at daycare, kissed his head, told him I loved him, walked out the door and drove to work. Around 2:45 I heard sirens going past the pharmacy where I worked. I remember hearing them and thinking that David sounded busy at work. A few minutes later the phone rang. It was the fire chief asking to speak with the pharmacist-my boss. This was not at all unusual or out of the ordinary, as we supplied some of the medications for the ambulances. A few minutes later the Chief came into the pharmacy. I immediately knew something was wrong but assumed something had happened to my husband. The Chief approached me and told me I needed to come with him. Right now. We got in his truck and he told me that my baby was very sick and that he had not been breathing when the ambulance arrived at our daycare. I immediately thought that somehow, I had caused this by giving him the new antihistamine prescribed by our doctor. I knew then that the sirens I heard just a little while before had been the fire department responding to the call for Luke.

When we arrived at the emergency room, every truck from the Fire Department was in the parking lot. I was ushered past the room where they were working on Luke, to the family room where my husband, and some of his fire department brothers waited. It was only later I learned that my husband had driven the ambulance on Luke's call. David had driven them to the emergency room while they worked on his son in the back of the ambulance.



Eventually the emergency room physician appeared and informed us that despite their best efforts, they were unable to revive Luke.

We later learned that Luke had been fed around lunchtime and laid down to sleep in a portable play yard, in the daycare provider's bedroom. She went to check on him every 15- 20 minutes. The last time she went in to check on him, sometime around 2:30 pm, she found him blue and unresponsive. She called 911 and began CPR.

Luke was buried on May 8, 2006, the same day that we were supposed to close on our first home.

Time is such a strange thing. We celebrated Luke's 14th heavenly birthday just yesterday. And, while I know that he would be 14, he is forever frozen in time- in our hearts and minds- at 2 months and 27 days old.

The first few days and weeks following Luke's death are a blur. We had overwhelming support from our family, friends and the community- as a whole. Important connections were made for grief and support services through the KIDS (formerly SIDS) Network. I remember standing in the kitchen of our new home speaking to Christy Schunn on the phone, unaware of how life would come full circle and that I would be working with Christy and the KIDS Network in a professional capacity 6 years later.

David and I have gone on to have two more children, Kael Matthew, born May 2, 2007, just one day before the first anniversary of Luke's death; and Emmalynne Grace, born June 17, 2010. Luke also has a big sister, Isabelle, who was just 6 years old when her half-brother, her first biological sibling, died.

Our journey as bereaved parents has led me to my current work as the Executive Director of Delivering Change: Healthy Families- Healthy Communities. Delivering Change was originally established and organized to address Geary County's infant mortality rate. The infant mortality statistics that brought this work to the attention of our community, include Luke David. Since its inception in 2012, Delivering Change has helped reduce the Geary County infant mortality rate by 50%, a rate well below state and national averages.



One of Delivering Change's biggest events, held twice a year, is our Luke's Community Baby Showers. This baby shower is replicated from the Community Baby Shower model of the KIDS Network and is named in honor and memory of our son. Since 2015, hundreds of Geary County women and their support persons have heard our story, have been educated on reducing the risks of Sudden Unexplained Infant Death Syndrome (SUID), learned about community resources available to them, and were provided the tools to have a safe sleep environment for their new baby at home.

David was promoted from firefighter/A-EMT to become Fire Marshal with the Junction City Fire Department in 2018. His career is now completely focused on life safety issues in our community. David and I are both proud board members of the KIDS Network.

All bereaved families learn the practice of grieving and living-at the same time. How closely joy and sadness are intertwined. We can't bring Luke back, but through our work, his brief life continues to impact our community- improving the health, safety and welfare of all families. His legacy is the daily work that we do, and for that we are grateful.

Jill and Dave Nelson