

What People Say: Tributes to Katherine

Friends and family share stories and memories of Katherine, her time at UNC Chapel Hill School of Nursing and her battle with cancer.

This is only a sampling of the tributes the SON received about Katherine before and after she died. Some of what is said refers to the Wilson Family—Anne, John, JD and Fletcher, and their influence and impact as friends and members of a close community.

My granddaughter was a friend and also a fellow nursing student with Katherine. We would like to remember her in a productive way!

--Maria C. Alves

I have worked with Katherine's mother for over 16 years and have seen her through her mother's eyes. This is a family of faith, courage, and love, and I greatly appreciate your effort to honor Katherine Wilson!

--Barbara P. Aycocock

Katherine's mother, Anne, is a friend from our childhood. It's so very sad to lose such a gift as Katherine.

--Mr. and Mrs. Donald Bassi

I live in Virginia now, but for several years I attended yoga class at Cornucopia House with Katherine. She was a wonderful person and it was with great sadness that I heard of her death.

--Patricia L. Bixby

My name is Eliza Brooks and Katherine is my best friend. This is such a sad time for everyone. The scholarship is a wonderful way for everyone to show their love for Katherine. I would like to contribute to the scholarship monetarily as well as help document her truly amazing story. She is such an inspiration to all who know her and even those that have only heard of her wonderful spirit and love for life. Katherine's graduation last May was a momentous occasion. She had been at Chapel Hill almost 9 years and finally graduated with a nursing degree despite all obstacles that were presented. One of the many obstacles was/is her vision...Mrs. Wilson would read Katherine Wilson hundreds of pages of textbook material assigned per week because of her double vision. Anyone else would have given up but Kath was determined to succeed. There is so much to write about Katherine...it is so hard to put it all on paper. I will work on putting together a comprehensive story of our friendship.

--Eliza Brooks

My name is Laura Clontz, and I recently received an email about the present efforts to secure funding for an endowment to honor Katherine Wilson at the UNC Chapel Hill School of Nursing. What an example of fortitude and inspiration Katherine represents to those around here. As a nurse myself, I fully understand Katherine's aspirations of wanting to be a nurse. Someone once said, and I'm paraphrasing, "Do what you love and it will never be known as work." Perhaps years from now, some fortunate woman or man will be able to "Do what they love," as a recipient of this scholarship. If the funding for this endowment is secured, Katherine's legacy will live through all the good that will come from another dedicated nurse, like herself. I know Katherine's mother, Anne. She is a devoted mother, wife, friend, teacher, and community volunteer. We are both members of a women's community-service organization in Morganton, known as the Morganton Service League. We, as members, can "Pay Forward" her gifts to this world by making monetary donations to this scholarship effort.

--Laura Clontz, President, Morganton Service League

This is a wonderful thing you are doing! I am impressed by the love and kindness shown to Katherine by the staff and the school!

--Mr. and Mrs. Dick Conway

I was the course coordinator for Nursing Care of Infants and Children, which was the last course Katherine took at the School of Nursing. From the beginning, I met with Katherine to discuss her special learning needs. Katherine attended class regularly unless physical problems prohibited attendance. She had difficulty reading the textbook at this time, so I lent an extra copy to her so that her mother could read the content and tape it for Katherine. Every aspect of learning was a real struggle for Katherine, but with every obstacle that arose, we would problem solve about how to overcome it. We had many talks about her desire to continue in the program and the importance of this to her. We talked about how she might function as a nurse after graduation, and she thought she would like to work as an RN in the clinic where she received much of her care. We talked about her making a difference even now, and I encouraged her to speak with the state legislature about her illness and the needs for patients with cancer.

Finally, it became apparent that Katherine could not finish the course, take the exam, nor complete the clinical. In the spring, when it was determined that she was eligible for Sigma Theta Tau [the national nursing honor society], I celebrated this honor with her. When she was declared eligible for graduation from the School of Nursing, I celebrated this with her as well, but with some mixed feelings. I had felt that this goal [of attaining a nursing degree] had kept Katherine going through some awfully rough times. I was happy for her to graduate, but really wanted her to still have goals.

This past fall, I was in the conference room in the oncology outpatient department discussing pediatric cancer with a student nurse. I noticed someone passing the open door, but didn't pay attention to who it was. Then, Katherine poked her head in and said, "I thought I recognized that voice!" She told me about her recent health issues. She said it was difficult to do anything. We talked briefly (while the student waited!). I told her I'd like to try to teach her to knit, which I have just begun again after a very long time. She sounded interested. I still hope to do that. For me, working with Katherine has been a very special opportunity to spend time with someone who never gave up trying to tackle any obstacle that was thrown her way. As I saw her sitting in class, alone because she no longer knew the students because those she entered with [in 1999] had graduated long before, I always thought she was incredibly brave. She kept trying and trying despite overwhelming odds. I shall never forget her spirit, her will and her courage.

--Professor Gayle Davis, January 20, 2005

Thank you, Bev Foster, for always keeping me and the rest of us who taught Katherine and worked with her so closely, aware of her progress and her health. You have kept in close contact with Katherine and her family and have shown them such special care and kindness – the true essence of nursing and caring that our profession strives to give and that we strive to teach our students. It is so thoughtful and selfless that Katherine should think of us, her faculty, as she faces a transition from this life to another, but so very much like her.

--Professor Yvonne Eaves, December 30, 2004

Katherine has always been a great friend to me. From playing in the back yard, to girl scouts, to passing notes in class, and burying tiny capsules, Katherine and I always had fun together! This scholarship reflects Katherine's determination, her care and interest in other people, and her zest for life.

--Kathryn S. Edmonson

I do not personally know Katherine, but I know her friend, John Acee. John and I send this in honor of John's great love for his friend.

--Jeanne Finan

Yesterday I visited with Katherine Wilson and her family at her Chapel Hill apartment. She has made the recent decision to not have any further treatments, and she will stay here with in-home hospice services. She looked pale and weak, but she was up and we had a lively visit in her living room looking through a scrap book of commencement photos and reminiscing about our memories over the last five years. She has a gift for each of the faculty members who taught her,

so I am playing Santa to deliver them. As always, I was impressed with her courage, as she faces death, and the loving support of her grieving family.

--Professor Beverly Foster, December 30, 2004

I first met Katherine Wilson as an applicant to our program. She had just suffered the loss of a significant boyfriend, perhaps her fiancé, in an avalanche, and was planning to return home for the semester for healing and therapy. I was struck by her physical fragility, but also by her inner strength and her self-assessment skills evidenced by her understanding of her strengths and limitations. She was well aware of the need to heal herself before having something to give to the profession as a student nurse.

My next interaction with Katherine was after her diagnosis of lung cancer as she began to piece together a student life under these circumstances. At this time I met her family and friends. I was struck by the strong support her family was able to give her in the midst of crushing news. Twice I shepherded Katherine through independent studies as she explored her illness and its meaning for nursing care. The first, an evaluation of her nursing care as a cancer patient, reflected her analysis of best nursing practices. The second, done near the end of her program of study with us, reflected her perception of family and client needs during the long periods between acute phases of her illness.

Katherine chose to give of herself to the Lineberger Cancer Center during the last year of her illness to foster the development of services for families and patients. Her videotape and CD are available as she shares her illness experiences with others. She gave me these materials with the instructions that I could use them as I saw best for the furthering of nursing education.

During her illness, I have come to know Katherine quite well. As her illness progressed, so did grave illnesses in my own family, many of whom she met during Relay for Life. She always reaches out to give support, care and love even as she needs it for herself as she struggles bravely ahead. She has been a model for us all in her life, her approach to life's grave circumstances, and her approach to her impending death. Her analysis of nursing care and patient needs, her desire to turn her illness for positive and lasting gain and her courage throughout leaves me with an indelible impression of her remarkable character and courage.

--Professor Beverly Foster, January 18, 2005

We are so thankful that the scholarship effort is underway. The Wilson's are dear friends and our son and Katherine played soccer together through middle and high school. She and her family have been an inspiration to us for many years!

--Jackie W. Jones

We are friends of Josh and Eliza Brooks and would like to make this donation in honor of Katherine Wilson and the scholarship fund named for her.

--Allison R. Kelly

We are neighbors of the Wilson's in Morganton and have known Katherine for many years. We are sad but we think this is a wonderful way to honor her life. She was a very special young lady!

--Barbara T. Lambert

Katherine was a close friend and classmate of our daughter Julie. We all loved her!

--Dr. and Mrs. John Lane

Though we did not know Katherine well, I am a close friend of her aunt, Martha. We also knew her grandmother, Katherine Campbell and her uncle, J. E. Campbell, from Johnson City, TN, where Katherine's mother Anne grew up. We have been moved by Katherine's bravery and spirit during her long struggle. I am sure her short but valiant life will be a real inspiration to others. As we have kept her in our prayers, we will always remember her and her wonderful family in our hearts.

--Joann W. Miller

Thank you for coordinating this amazing endeavor. Yesterday one of Katherine's favorite lines for why we should allow her to do something came to mind. "This is not the dress rehearsal." How right she was!

--Morganton Junior Women's Club

Katherine Wilson was a close friend of my daughter, Katie Parker, and I would like to honor her life by making this contribution to the Scholarship Fund.

--Kern Parker

Thank you for organizing the campaign to raise funds for the Katherine Wilson Scholarship. Though we do not know Katherine personally, we have followed her struggle with cancer with hope and admiration. Her parents, her grandmother and her aunts and uncles have been our dear friends over the years.

--Janet A. Powell

I am a friend of Katherine's from Montreat and I'm so excited about this scholarship. What a great idea!!

--Anne Tilghman McEaddy Reiss

Katherine and my daughter, Holly Jones Underwood, attended church together and they were friends in school. I remember the Christmas Eve at church that Katherine told us quite excitedly that she was going to nursing school (my daughter is also a nurse). My daughter and I think the world of Katherine. I helped with the youth group at church when Katherine was in high school and she was always sweet, friendly, and respectful. I have been saddened by her illness.

--Renee S. Rostan

To know Katherine Wilson is to know the very best of you. Hers is a simple story--simply amazing. I am a friend of the Wilson's, not the most intimate of friends, but a good friend nonetheless. We share small-town life as lots of people everywhere do: years of church work and fellowship, school activities (Katherine's mom taught both my children in elementary school and was one of their best teachers, I might add), and the all-too-infrequent social occasions. There are also many therapeutic evenings at the monthly bridge table, where we all share the hopes and dreams, accomplishments and disappointments of not only ourselves but also our children. And so I got to know Katherine, watching her grow up as a youth in our church, having her baby-sit occasionally, seeing her make the honor roll again and again, and knowing of her dedication and hard work on the soccer field. I saw her leave Morganton to attend their beloved Carolina, where she again excelled and eventually decided to become a nurse. It was during nursing school that cancer reared its ugly head. Call it fate, call it destiny, call it bad luck--it's a tragedy that none of us ever should have to face, much less at the age of twenty-three. Katherine, with the strong support of her family and friends, faced it head-on, with courage beyond her years and a steadfast determination to rise above it. It was the only way she knew; she was just being herself. Throughout the YEARS of endless diagnostic testing and chemotherapy and radiation and their relentless side effects, Katherine continued her academic progress and graduated from nursing school. She has remained the beautiful daughter of wonderful parents who take joy in everything she does, the younger sister of two loving brothers who have shared every minute of Katherine's journey. The countless numbers who are blessed to call her "friend" are a testament to her caring, generous, thoughtful, forgiving, and fun loving nature. That's just who Katherine is. I think of Katherine frequently. Sometimes her long thick naturally blond hair (the envy of even supermodels) is floating on the breeze, and strands are waving around her big inquisitive eyes. Other times she is sporting a knitted cap to warm her magnificent bald crown. I don't think she really believed me when I once told her I knew full well that my unadorned skull could never be as perfectly shaped as hers; they definitely had hers in mind when they named it "crown." But she is always lithe and of perfect posture, always quiet and modest in strength, gentle and proud of character, a relentlessly hard worker who never gives up. That is the Katherine I know. And she

makes me want to be the very best that I can be. Those of us who know her can draw on a wealth of memories to help us accomplish our goals, whatever they might be. For you who are not so fortunate, who might know of her only through the Katherine Wilson Scholarship fund, you need look no further than within yourself--simply, to the very best of yourself--to see a glimpse of her.

--Jan Salisbury

Katherine and I were high school friends growing up and although our lives pulled us in different directions there is a bond between all of us "Morganton-Girls" which will forever connect us. Katherine was a truly wonderful and courageous person whom I will never forget.

--Destiny D. Smith

We are happy to honor Katherine Wilson with a gift to her scholarship fund. We are former members of First Presbyterian Church in Morganton, NC. We have followed her illness through reports in the church newsletter, and our hearts go out to her and her family!

--Connie S. Weaver

Dear Ms. Hawthorne,

I have been a friend of Katherine Wilson's for the past 12 years, and I can say without a doubt that she is the truest and dearest friend I have ever had. We grew up in the same small town, Morganton, NC, and attended high school together. After graduation we both attended college at UNC Chapel Hill. We shared an apartment for two years at UNC and more than that, we shared countless memories. In fact, when I think back to my high school, college, and post-college days, there are very few memories that do not include her. I am forever blessed with these memories.

One memory that stands out occurred during the summer of 1998 when Katherine, another friend and I decided to spend the summer in Jackson Hole, Wyoming. The three of us decided to pack up our car and move to Wyoming without jobs and a place to stay. Some might say that was a pretty risky adventure, but we were young and hopeful. In the end everything worked out ... we got jobs, found a small apartment and had the most fabulous summer adventure. This adventure typifies the kind of person Katherine is, young, hopeful and faithful, willing to take risks in life. She enjoyed the journey of the adventure that summer just as much as the destination.

In college there were times when Katherine struggled with what she would do with her life (as many of us do). She made terrific grades and took all the pre-med classes but in the end she decided to become a nurse. A nurse, she said, gets to work with and help people. As a nursing student she inspired so many of us to remember the importance of helping others and trying to make a difference. Her passion for improving people's lives especially when faced with an illness is evident in a couple of ways. For one, she spoke many times about how unfortunate it was that so many Americans are unable to receive appropriate medical care due to a lack of health insurance, and as a result, she thought it was vital to advocate for health insurance for all people. In addition, she believed it was essential to treat patients in a holistic manner considering the social, psychological, emotional and mental factors that come into play. Patients, she believed, are much more than the illnesses they have acquired (particularly in regards to cancer and other chronic diseases). However, many health professionals' primary focus is to treat the disease. Most recently (January 2004) Katherine gave a speech advocating for the funding of the new Lineberger Cancer Center at UNC and urged stakeholders to consider improving support services for cancer patients both during and after their treatment cycle. Her suggestions have been influential to those professionals as they develop the comprehensive cancer center. Future scholarship recipients should continue on in her footsteps advocating for health insurance and holistic care for patients and their families.

Overall, Katherine is a generous, mild-manner, kind-hearted woman who gives so much love to everyone around her. My wish is that everyone, at least once in their lives, has a friend like her. I am one of the lucky ones. There is a quote that captures how she has touched the lives of others:

"So many people come into our lives and quickly go. Some move our souls to dance. They awaken us to new understanding with the passing whisper of their wisdom. Some people make the sky more beautiful to gaze upon. They stay in our lives for a while and leave footprints on our hearts. And we are never, ever the same." – Anonymous

I hope this glimpse into Katherine's life leaves footprints on the hearts of future Carolina nurses and inspires them to make a difference in the lives of patients and their families.

Sincerely,
Alison I. Whisnant, MSW, MSPH '05

Katherine Wilson: A beautiful person in my life.
--Kathryn Whisnant

I am so pleased to see this scholarship growing over the last several months. I cannot think of a better way to honor such a lovely person as Katherine Wilson. I have never seen a more determined individual over the last several years. Over the years, I have watched Katherine and my daughter, Alison, grow up and mature into beautiful young ladies. Their friendship was extremely special. I remember the day Katherine was diagnosed. It was just weeks before they finished undergraduate school at UNC. No matter how far they were separated, they always stayed in touch. Through all of Katherine's difficult times, she and Alison talked of life and laughed about the good times. They would see each other as often as they could and talked on the phone a great deal. Alison was so excited to be back in Chapel Hill these last two years so she could be close to Katherine. Many times she shared with Alison that she had had a wonderful life and that if she did not win her battle she was thankful for the life that she had. Katherine would have been a model nurse because she experienced first hand what it is to be a patient. She knew what made a good nurse. She possessed such compassion for others and she had such a quest for knowledge to learn what it took to be the best nurse she could be. In spite of her cancer, she chose to have a positive attitude about her disease. She was so proud of herself when she was awarded her nursing degree. She felt such an accomplishment. Her determination to make a mark in this world was illustrated when she spoke with doctors and legislators about funding money to the Lineberger Center for further research on her disease. She reminded them that often times these professionals get so caught up in the actual disease that they forget the person behind the disease. What compassion!!! I have seen the video made of her speech. What a dynamic lady! Anyone receiving this scholarship should be highly honored because they are carrying on Katherine's nursing dream by training to give loving health care to others. I truly believe that Katherine's spirit of dedication and commitment to the healthcare world will continue to remain in the halls and classrooms of the SON. I know that all future recipients of the scholarship will help keep her great spirit alive through the care they will give to others. What a joy and a true celebration of Katherine's life!
--Susan Whisnant

Katherine and her family are all in Chapel Hill, NC, and hospice nurses are visiting periodically. She has everything there to make her as comfortable as possible. She's had several out-of-town visitors. One evening during the holidays, a hospice volunteer who plays the dulcimer came by her apartment and played for family and friends.

Many of us have been wondering what we could do to let Katherine know how proud we are of her recent accomplishments and the courage she has shown. Katherine's friend Amanda [Womble] and some of their other nursing school classmates have actually taken action and embarked on a remarkable path forward. Amanda is working to raise money to establish a scholarship to the University of North Carolina School of Nursing in honor of Katherine. I'm copying below an e-mail from Amanda that was sent to me by Katherine's friend, Eliza Phelps Brooks, which explains the scholarship fund.
--Martha Williams, Katherine's aunt, January 3, 2005

Despite the visits from hospice, the termination of treatment, and the rising need for sleep and pain medication, Katherine continues to 'hang in there' ... to the extent that she and Brian (Wood) packed her oxygen in his back-pack and took off for the movies night before last!
--Martha Williams, January 6, 2005

Katherine is my cousin and has been so dear to all of us. We are so happy that we can contribute to this fund so that Katherine's legacy will live on as she continues to help others.
--Stephen J. Hicks and Laura Williams

Dear All,

As all of you know, Katherine is not doing well. David Greer (my boyfriend) and I are working on a full UNC nursing scholarship in Katherine's honor. We have already raised \$5,000 and are on our way to \$10,000. This scholarship is something that can go on forever to honor Katherine. The way it works is that we need to raise about \$100,000 to get a full scholarship. Once we raise this money, it is in an endowment and so the interest of five percent (about \$5,000) will be awarded to an incoming nursing student each year. I am keeping the Wilson's and all our friends up to date on the progress and I am going to get input from Katherine and the Wilson's on what type of student will get this scholarship.

We need everyone's help. We are working on a couple of big fundraiser ideas but individual gifts are very important. If any of you want to make a gift to UNC, this is a great opportunity. Please talk to your families and the companies you work for. Many businesses will match the amount an individual contributes. For example, if your mom, dad, brother or sister works for a large company and they want to give \$2,000, the company may match that amount.

This is very attainable. Think of it like this. We only need 100 people to give \$1,000, and we know that Katherine and her family have at least that many friends. That does not include all the people we know.

Please email, write or call your friends and family members. The Wilson's have had a huge impact on UNC, as UNC has had on them. This is a wonderful way to honor the Wilson's and to help someone else obtain a nursing education. In addition, it is a great way to show the nursing school how much we appreciate them for being understanding and flexible with Katherine's schedule.

Please feel free to call me or email me or David. During this sad time, I think this is a positive way to focus my energy and somehow make a difference. I wish you all a very Merry Christmas and happy holidays.
--Amanda Womble, December 2004

Katherine Wilson is a very special person who was tragically diagnosed with small cell lung cancer almost 5 years ago. It started, as what we all thought was pneumonia, which then led to a biopsy that showed that she had cancer. It was a very long few weeks for Katherine, her family and friends and the results were what nobody expected, including the top physicians at UNC Hospitals. Being so young and a non-smoker, this diagnosis shocked and puzzled everyone. However, Katherine knew what she had to do, which was to fight her hardest and keep moving forward. For those of us who have been fortunate enough to know Katherine, she has had an enormous positive impact on our lives; and for those who just know her story, they are drawn in by what they hear. The way that Katherine has battled this dreaded disease has inspired us all. She has had much support from her immediate and extended family, her boyfriend Brian Woods, her friends, her church and even some people she has never been close to. It has been HER drive and determination that has inspired us to honor Katherine and the Wilson family by starting the Katherine Wilson Endowed Scholarship at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill School of Nursing. When Katherine was born, I am sure she had no choice but to be a Tar Heel fan. Her grandfather and father had received their degrees from UNC and she began cheering on

the Heels as a child. Both of her brothers graduated from UNC and Katherine followed in their footsteps, not because she had to, she was already a Tar Heel at heart. Katherine enrolled at UNC in 1995 and as most freshman, she was unsure of her major but she could have picked anything since she had always been a great student. After struggling with different ideas and taking a little time away for herself, Katherine decided to go to nursing school so that she could help others. For those of us who know Katherine, we were not surprised when she chose nursing. Her warm heart, her exceptional ability to relate to others, and her infectious positive attitude were going to be perfect for this career. Katherine started nursing school in 1999 and it was during her first year that she was diagnosed with lung cancer. The nursing school and her professors worked with her and her schedule over the next few years so that she could continue her education. During this time she had many setbacks including reoccurrences of the cancer, ongoing treatment and the daily challenges that are unique to cancer. Her drive and persistence paid off when she received her bachelor of science in nursing in the spring of 2004. In December 2004 Katherine and her family chose to forego treatment and return home with hospice care where her last days would be spent more comfortably. She is surrounded by family and friends and is comfortable in her personal surroundings. Recently, Katherine learned of this scholarship effort in her honor. Her eyes lit up and she said, "I can't believe my name will live on forever." We challenge you to help up make this dream a reality and every dollar counts. We want to give back to Katherine, her family, and the University that she loves. She has provided us with priceless lessons on life and an unforgettable desire to get the most out of everyday.

--Amanda Womble, January 2005

"I have taken care of hundreds of patients, but the lessons that Katherine taught me will stay with me for the rest of my life. She truly showed me what will and determination can accomplish. She exuded for others how powerful the love of family and friends can be. Her quiet dignity and compassion for others, as well as her dry wit will be a source of inspiration and comfort to me all of my life. I will tell Katherine's story to other patients in their worst times... a story that says that love prevails and that if you give into the love boundless gifts will be given. God has plans that we will never by privy to, but God knew exactly what he was doing when he sent Katherine to touch all of our lives. As the director of the Cancer Center, Dr. Shelley Earp said, 'She was the bravest person I knew.' I concur."

--Ann Fish-Stegall