

Our Hearts are Home-Stories of Loss and Hope

Amanda Kelsall (February 16, 1991-January 5, 2014)

“Thus far the Lord has helped us.” 1 Samuel 7:12b

This quote, taken from Amanda’s journal written on July 26, 2006, is one of countless scriptures written out by Amanda. As she spent time daily with the Lord, Amanda filled many journals with verses that stood out to her, prayers to her “Papa”, as well as thoughts, dreams and plans for the future.

Our Family

“A circle of strength and love, founded on faith, joined in love, kept by God, forever together!”



John Kelsall moved to the little town on Exeter, Ontario to begin his police career with the Ontario Provincial Police in the spring of 1985. It took him a little over a year to find Sharon Rundle who had just completed her Teaching Degree. John and Sharon met in May of 1986, were engaged in May of 1987 and joined in marriage on July 16, 1988. Two and a half years later, Amanda was born in a snowstorm in London, Ontario on February 16, 1991. She was the first born of three beautiful daughters. Debra was also born in a snowstorm on March 12, 1993, in Belleville, Ontario and our youngest daughter, Jenna waited for some nicer weather and was born on June 3, 1995, also in Belleville.

Our family is one of adventure, sport, celebration of each other and devotion to the Lord. Favourite family memories include our wonderful times at the family cottage, some incredible vacations like Hawaii, France, and Germany (which were family reunions during the year John was posted to Afghanistan to train the Afghan National Police).

Athletic schedules kept our family hopping as the girls participated in track, cross country, gymnastics, swimming, baseball, volleyball, skiing, snowboarding, football, soccer, hiking, biking, dance and even pole vault (Jenna only!). Sky diving was always a dream of the girls to do and although Amanda never had the opportunity during her lifetime, the rest of us were eventually able to fulfil this dream.

Over the years the girls also learned various musical instruments including piano, flute, violin, guitar, bag pipes and drums. Family life was busy growing up and included lots of fun and creative celebrations with family and friends as well as hard work and studying, delicious meals together, late nights and early mornings!

As our girls grew up, their unique interests, strengths and passions gradually became more defined. Amanda decided in her tenth grade that Medicine was the direction she wanted to go. Debra didn't realize her passion for finance until second year university and now has been successfully working in the Financial Industry for 6 years. Jenna, after earning a degree in Kinesiology has also earned her Registered Nurse certification and is soon to begin her nursing career at Sick Kids in Toronto. We are so proud of each of our girls and forever grateful to our loving heavenly Father for His presence and guidance in each of their and our lives.

All of these major life decisions we committed to prayer, seeking the Lord's direction each step of the way and counting on Him to show the path. What we did not plan for, as no family can, was the immense tragedy of losing our oldest daughter, Amanda, at the age of 22.

Amanda
"Worthy of Love"



Amanda was an incredibly determined and energetic girl, full of passion and love, creativity, drama, hard work, studying, sport, reading, lots of silliness and a heart for the Lord. Spending time with her Heavenly Father was always first and foremost in her list of priorities.

Amanda had a deep love and concern for others. Her leadership traits led her into areas of mentorship with younger girls from leading a Worship dance team to conducting a God's Girls Bible study and organizing a Christian group at her high school. Even today those girls whose lives were touched by Amanda many years ago can look back to the connection with Amanda, and her passion for them and the Lord, as a pivotal moment in their lives. Amanda's legacy is one of personal connection which has made a difference for eternity.

Amanda's desire was always to become more like Christ. She would often go through a little word game with her Daddy and ask, "Am I a champion daddy?" "Of course!", her Dad would always say, "Yes, you are a champion!" as he would also tell our other two daughters! They are all champions!

Amanda's determined character, drive and mind set was integral to all of her pursuits. Everything that she was involved in, she did to the best of her ability with sheer grit and determination! Such is the sometimes-hard life of a perfectionist but certainly there was never any quit in her heart and mind.

I remember watching one of Amanda's 800 m races. Her mind was taking her body into a territory never before ventured and down the home stretch as she flew by, she said "I can't

make my legs go any faster!”. Amanda had no fear of mistakes, failure or losing and would always dream bigger, try harder and learn more beyond her perceived limits. She had no problem redefining those shortcomings and challenges and certainly that courage brought her to areas the Lord could use and be glorified with.



After high school, Amanda studied Chemistry at Queen’s University in Kingston, Ontario, with the goal of getting into Medicine. This pathway was strewn with obstacles that could only be overcome by faith steps. Amanda often wondered how she was going to get into Medical school with such a high calibre of competition. Her dad would say, “Just do your part and the Lord will make it happen!” And indeed, He did. Amanda applied to only one university for Medicine: U Ottawa, in our Nation’s capital city, Ottawa, Ontario. With God’s help and just being herself, Amanda was delighted to receive acceptance into the UOttawa Faculty of Medicine after only the third year of her undergrad. This was a true testimony to God’s plan and Amanda’s trust in Him.

When Amanda was studying at Queen’s, a dear lady from our church was assigned to Amanda as part of our church’s outreach to encourage and support students who were studying away from home. Linda Brown began to pray for Amanda and to send care packages, notes and thoughtful words of encouragement to her! Amanda was truly blessed and kept asking us who this wonderful lady was! At that point, we had not yet had the privilege of meeting Linda. Amanda truly felt God’s love through these gifts and messages and knew that they were

hugs from heaven. Linda had taken her assignment seriously and committed it to the Lord's leading. Amanda was so blessed because of this. Linda has since become a wonderful friend and will always hold a special place in our hearts.

Amanda began her medical studies with great fervour as always, studying diligently to gain an understanding of the most intricately and intelligently designed human body! Amanda's learning style was to completely understand the entire theory and concept of the problem where she would break it down to logical components and master the process. On one occasion during her first year of medicine she was engrossed in an extremely complicated human organ system and was having difficulty mastering the vast knowledge base. When one of her colleagues discovered what she was doing, he told Amanda it was impossible to know it all in first year and just to memorize the answer! Such was Amanda's keen mind for knowledge.

Besides her thirst for learning, Amanda loved getting to know her most amazing classmates and thoroughly enjoyed spending time studying, working out and going on adventures together.



Near the beginning of her medical studies, Amanda began a relationship with the boy of her dreams! Amanda fell in love with Jonathan when she was in Grade 6, but it wasn't until many years later that JT noticed her, and a wonderful relationship of adventure and romance began. JT was also interested in Medicine at the time but had not yet been accepted into a medical program.

Besides Amanda's passion for medicine, she had a strong desire to travel to Africa. In March of 2011, Amanda began to sponsor a little girl, Charlotte, from Ghana through International Needs (IN). In the summer of 2013, the Lord opened up an opportunity for Amanda's passion for Africa and Medicine to come together through a Medical Elective in Ghana. She spent several weeks with her dear friend Natalie (sister of JT) in a remote village working in a hospital with Elective Ghana and volunteering at an Orphanage. At the beginning and end of her trip, she connected with the Child Sponsorship Co-ordinator (Comfort) from International Needs who had become a great friend of the family! This was a huge blessing!

In December of 2013, Amanda spent time with our family at home, at our family cottage and with her boyfriend JT. We made some great memories that Christmas snowshoeing, having family and friend celebrations, snowmobiling and just being together. We said goodbye to Amanda from our family cottage...we didn't know at the time that it would be our last goodbye.

A few days later, Amanda and Jonathan were travelling back to Ottawa. Jonathan had recently secured a job in Ottawa and the two of them were very excited to continue their relationship with less distance between them as they had become accustomed to a long-distance relationship.

On January 5, 2014, we took Debra and Jenna to Toronto. Jenna was studying at the University of Toronto and Debra would take the train back to Montreal where she was studying at McGill. We exchanged a few texts with the girls as they each went their own way, including texts with Amanda as we knew that she and JT would be heading to Ottawa at that time.

On their way to Ottawa, Amanda and JT stopped on Hwy 17 at the Dinner Bell for lunch with Grammie and Poppie (John's parents). Time spent with them was always a highlight! They had a wonderful time together and then kissed and hugged Grammie and Poppie goodbye. Grammie told us later that Amanda looked absolutely radiant that day! Just a few hours later, a snowstorm made their trip a treacherous one. As they crossed an icy bridge at Petawawa, a transport truck collided head on with their vehicle. For Amanda, this was the bridge to heaven as she met Jesus that night. Jonathan had serious injuries and was taken to the Trauma Unit at the Ottawa Hospital. Poppie's last text to Amanda was "Have you arrived home safely?" Amanda had indeed arrived home safely. This was her Holy Wedding Day and she was now home for eternity with her groom, Jesus Christ!

In the summer of 2010 after listening to a song called "Pure Bride" by Leeland, Amanda wrote a prayer in her journal that the Lord would give her inspiration for another painting (she had recently completed a painting of "The Shack" by William P Young). She wrote in her journal, "What about a picture of the Bride of Christ running towards her groom in all His glory." She later completed this painting which we knew at the time was inspired. We got it out that night and were in awe of how the Lord had answered her prayer. It was as if Amanda had painted a self-portrait of her entrance to heaven!



Where do you turn in such a tragedy-any parent's worst nightmare? I will always remember one of the ways in which the Lord showed us His presence that night as we were Skyping with Debra and Jenna. They had both now made it back to their respective places of residence in Toronto and Montreal. We had kept them on the call from the time we heard of the accident until several hours later that night when we were finally informed that Amanda had not survived the accident. Shortly after the news reached us, Jenna was being comforted in her residence by some Christian friends that the Lord had placed right across the hall from her and a Christian friend joined Debra at her place in Montreal. After the initial shock, Debra and her friend began to play the ukulele and sing praises to God. They were worshipping with Amanda!

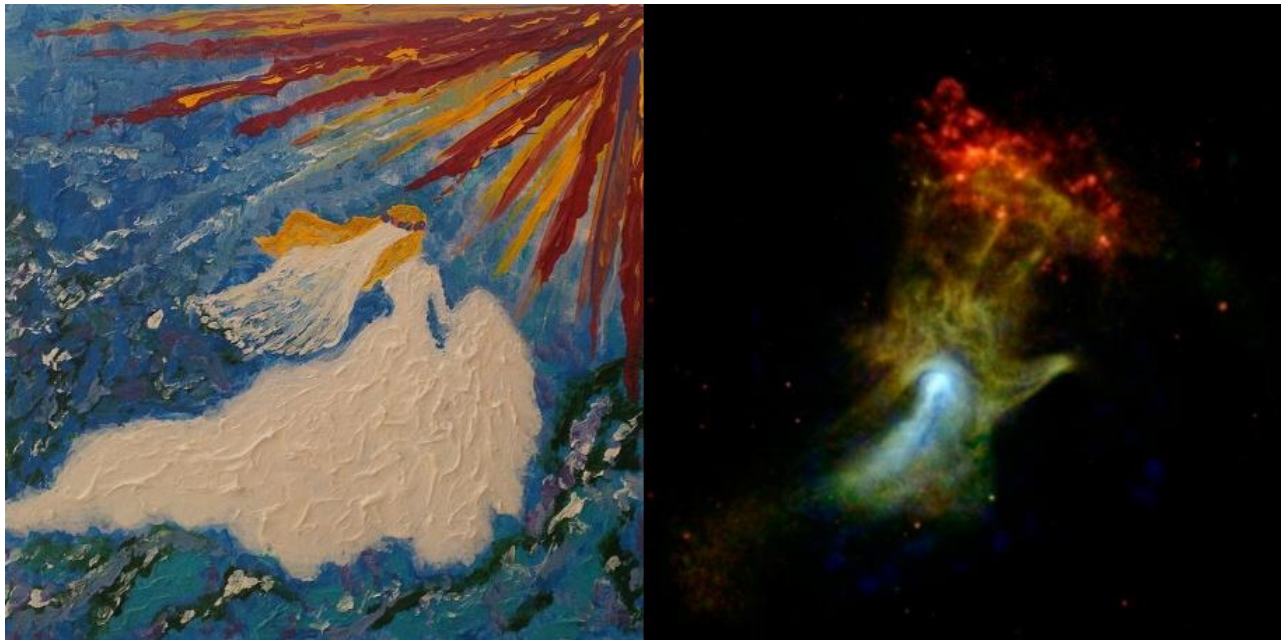
The Lord was showing us His presence along this journey right from the start. This would be the only way we could ever move forward from this point-knowing that God would be with us. This was an answer to one of Amanda's prayers that I would find in her journal years later. On October 26, 2008, Amanda wrote, "Dear Daddy, Jesus, I really want to know you for real. I want to experience the power of the resurrection. I want to be filled by you so that you can keep my mind in perfect peace, regardless of the circumstance."

This is indeed the only way we can live in perfect peace regardless of the circumstance. We need to be filled up by Jesus and draw all of our strength from Him. 2 Corinthians 12:9 says, "My grace is all you need. My power works best in weakness." During these days and still now,

we draw our strength from the great and precious promises in God's word. Standing on this firm foundation was and is the only way to move forward with hope and purpose.

I remember my husband saying to me very early on in this journey that we don't want to become *bitter* through this but *better*. We would need the Lord's comfort and guidance to navigate these deep waters and become better for this in the end. We knew from the beginning that would only be possible through God's guidance and strength.

On the day of the Memorial, January 10, 2014, a friend drew our attention to an image she had seen on the news that morning. It was an image captured and named by NASA, "The Hand of God". This image is a supernova remnant left behind after a star exploded in our Milky Way Galaxy. The evening of the memorial we placed the painting of the "Pure Bride" beside the NASA image of "The Hand of God" and we were blown away at the similarity! This was a profound milestone marker of God's faithfulness! Through these images the Lord was telling us that our Amanda, the "Pure Bride" was in the "Hand of God".



Mission Amanda

“Blessed are those who die in the Lord from now on....for they will rest from their hard work; for their good deeds follow them.” Revelation 14:13

The University of Ottawa held a memorial for Amanda in addition to the one we held locally. One of the first things we were asked by the faculty was if we would like UOttawa to graduate Amanda with her class in the spring of 2016. Of course, we said, “Yes!” We did not even know this would be a possibility, but we were so grateful. John was given the opportunity to speak at the memorial in Ottawa and he spoke on the Love of God. The Lord then prompted us to keep a connection with this 2016 Medical class and demonstrate God’s love to them. This was the beginning of Mission Amanda and spreading seeds of faith, hope and love.

Knowing how much the care packages that Amanda received from Linda Brown meant to her, we began sending care packages to all the students in Amanda’s 2016 MD class and many of the faculty involved. Over the course of the next two and a half years, and with the help of friends, family, community and church, we delivered approximately 1000 personalized care packages to these students and faculty. Each package was prepared with love and contained practical items and a message of hope. We also began a prayer team at that time who continue to pray for these students (now physicians) and faculty by name. God has called each one by name and we are grateful to have an opportunity to continue to bring them to the throne of God in prayer!

The 2016 MD class wanted to establish a way to remember Amanda, so they initiated the “sMiles for Amanda” Run in May of 2014. The purpose of this annual event, besides honouring Amanda was to grow seeds of faith, hope and love by supporting a worthy cause. Each year since 2014, a variety of charities have been supported. In 2016, a group of compassionate women (WE Unite) from our hometown Horseshoe Valley, Ontario, initiated an extension of this run to be held locally. The event continued virtually in the past two years because of the pandemic, but this did not stop the momentum.

The “sMiles for Amanda” Event, organized by the University of Ottawa Medical Students and the WE Unite group from Horseshoe, is supported by Mission Amanda. Each year since 2018, Mission Amanda has organized an annual “*Higher* Tea Party” in support of the chosen charities for the year. The name “*Higher* Tea” was chosen since Amanda had planned to celebrate her 23rd birthday with “High Tea” at the Chateau Laurier in Ottawa in February of 2014. She did not know that she would actually be having “Higher” Tea with Jesus for her 23rd birthday instead! A much grander celebration for sure!

God has used these events to continue to grow the seeds of faith, hope and love that were planted during Amanda’s life.

Since Amanda’s home going, we have continued the International Needs (IN) child sponsorship which Amanda began during her undergrad. We had the wonderful privilege of meeting

Charlotte and her family in their remote village in Ghana, Africa as part of a "Discovery Tour" with IN in January of 2017. We were so blessed to see the great work that this mission is doing and to give Charlotte and her family hugs and kisses and some gifts from Canada!

Since that time our daughter Debra has also began to sponsor one of Charlotte's sisters through IN. We have also added another sponsor child through IN by divine appointment! Her name is "Winner" which reminded us of Amanda's frequent question about whether she was a champion! Now we have a "Champion" sponsor child named Winner! Her birthday is miraculously on the same day as Amanda's (February 16) in the year 2014, which means that Winner was born on Amanda's first birthday in heaven! How amazing and divine is that?

It is a blessing that Amanda's elementary school gives out an award in Amanda's memory each year. There is also a Scholarship given in Amanda's name at her High School as well as at the University of Ottawa for students in the MD Program.

JT

"Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge Him and He will direct your paths." Proverbs 3:5-6

Amanda's boyfriend, JT, had applied a few times to Medical School. Until 2014, he had not been accepted. On the day of the first annual sMiles for Amanda Run in May of 2014, JT received the news that he had been accepted into NOSOM (Northern Ontario School of Medicine)! God's impeccable timing never ceases to amaze! God also revealed Himself that weekend through the appearance of several rainbows! Rainbows are one of God's hugs from heaven that He always sends at just the right moment! Even a hurricane, named Hurricane Amanda, was in the news on the day of the run! Hurricane Amanda was the strongest Eastern Pacific Cyclone ever recorded in the month of May. Although it was the first named storm, hurricane and major hurricane of the 2014 hurricane season, it caused minimal damage. Just like Amanda, always stirring the pot, but just to add a flare of adventure and pizzazz!

Amanda had planned to run the Ottawa Half Marathon that May. JT had signed up to run it with her, though it would be his first ever half marathon. Despite multiple fractures, soft tissue tears and bruises, cuts, casts, crutches and a body brace, by the race weekend, all of that came off and through the pain and with determination, JT laced up his runners and accompanied by my husband wearing Amanda's bib, the two of them crossed the finish line side by side in approximately 2 and a half hours! Only in the Lord's strength and with His miraculous healing!



This has been a tough journey for JT, but with God's strength and JT's hard work and trust, JT is now Dr. Jonathan Taylor (Family Physician with additional training in Anesthesia). He is about to embark upon his medical career. Along the way he has had much experience in various medical and cultural surroundings as he has travelled the world! He has also become an accomplished triathlete developing proficiency in many other sports as well. He leads an active life of adventure and love for his family and friends! We are so grateful for the healing touch of our Great Physician who has enabled this achievement and continues to heal physical and emotional wounds.

Pressing On

"I press on towards the goal..." Philippians 3:14

"Fixing our eyes on Jesus...for the joy set before Him endured the cross..." Hebrews 12:2

Anyone who has ever lost someone so precious and close to them will know that the memories, absence, and longing for are an ever present "program" running in the background of our minds. Songs, places, and pictures instantly bring us to a point in time where our loved one was with us and how we mourn again but in a different way over time. I once heard that the

difference between happiness and joy is sorrow: happiness is situation dependent, and joy is situation independent. Sorrow will always whither away happiness, but joy comes in the mourning/morning. Joy can only grow and transcend sorrow when there is hope. And that hope comes from our precious Saviour who is grieving alongside and comforting us. The promises from our Lord of “I will never leave you or forsake you” and “My grace is sufficient” are eternal fuel to live a full, joyful and restored life where our new normal is better than our old one. May we become kinder, more patient, forgiving, loving and living in the moment with an attitude of gratitude. One day we will know and see that what had happened was for the best and the most loving thing our Heavenly Father could do for us and for those who were saved and impacted as a result. So, we will not waste the sorrow, but live in the joy and pass it on.

This past Christmas 2020 was particularly hard for our family. I (John) found myself wrapping presents in tears at midnight on Christmas eve. I was going through a Christmas box looking for wrapping paper and bows when I found a note written by Amanda the night before she left for her first year of post-secondary education at Queens University in Kingston Ontario. Her words were in a voice here and now and filled the moment and future with love and hope:

“To my dear family, thank you so much for blessing me so completely with all your love and gifts. This summer has been so much fun. We have had so many wonderful adventures, but most of all I have just enjoyed being with you. You are all so precious to me. Whenever I think of you (which is often), my heart just explodes with love! Jenna, I love your tender spirit, your beautiful smile and your hot little feet that you put all over me at our sleepover. Debra, I am so thankful for your gentle, thoughtful heart that just pours warmth into my heart. As much as I hated working at the KK (Kids Koral), I would do it again if it meant more time with you. Daddy, I love your jokes (even when they bug me!), I love your strong character and your strong muscles, and I love when you laugh till you cry when you are trying to tell a funny story. Thank you for being the best Daddy ever. Mommy, you are simply the best mom that ever walked the planet... I’d take you over that Proverbs 31 lady any day. You are a friend at all times, always there to help me and love me. Thank you, Family for loving me and supporting me and being my 4 best friends..... Now don’t be too sad, you can’t get rid of me that easy!!!!”

So life is not to just endure but to ensure that we carry on with the Mission the Lord intended for us as a result of the loss which in the end is really a gain. To any one in shock and sorrow I say, “Those feelings are normal first of all. They are natural because the Lord created us with an emotional dimension but faith in our Lord transcends our emotions. We walk by faith and not by sight/emotions. Sometimes we just don’t feel it. A piece was taken from us when Amanda went home but God supplied His Peace, and so it continues but we have Hope! Not a hopeless end but endless Hope. We have to keep our eyes fixed on Jesus”.

The Lord has answered our prayers for comfort and healing. There is no fear but the presence of our Lord and Saviour. Our Amanda is more alive than we are; fully with Jesus with no sin nature and perfectly healed; a “Pure Bride”, only made pure through the blood of Jesus. Amanda has just simply changed addresses and we are but a step behind. Its like going to

McDonalds where Amanda has gone in to order just moments before we do. We come in 1 minute later behind her and she turns around and says, "Oh there you are!". That is what heaven, life and death are like.

How it all works is like this: God's Light and Presence is in us for a purpose; to shine through. The only way that works is if we are broken - like clay vessels. That's how people see the difference that the Lord makes. This sorrow will be used for eternity, and one day, maybe even now, you will know it was worth it all. We live for Jesus and for those who have gone and until then we keep our eyes on the mark.

2 Corinthians 4:7-18

But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us. We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair..... We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body..... because we know that the one who raised the Lord Jesus from the dead will also raise us with Jesus....All this is for your benefit, so that the grace that is reaching more and more people may cause thanksgiving to overflow to the glory of God. Therefore we do not lose heart... for our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen, since what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.

All for the Kingdom,
With love, Sharon and John Kelsall