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### **Christina Renee Robinson (34 years-old)**

#### **Wife of Jim Robinson (Cal-Dive International)**

My wife Christina is 34 years young now and the mother of our 9 year-old son, Alex. She was diagnosed with Lupus (SLE – Systemic Lupus Erythematosus) 12 years ago. She and our family have endured the suffering that accompany this illness. The disease has struck her family before. Most notably, her sister Samantha who passed away six years ago at the age of 30 from complications related to SLE.

A brief explanation may help understand the disease. The word Lupus comes from the word "Lupine", meaning "Wolf". The immune system's programming doesn't operate properly. Instead of working to defend the body from injury, correct illnesses or remove toxins, it will in turn use the powerful forces it possesses to destroy the very tissue and organs it was designed to protect. Much like the wolf, it lays in wait for the most convenient and deadly opportunity. The byproducts of Lupus include rheumatoid arthritis, kidney disease, pneumonia, heart disease and a vast number of other ailments.

The basic treatment and management for a Lupus patient is steroid therapy. The goal is to suppress the immune system. The weaker the immune system the less damage it can cause. But long-term steroid use can create side affects as dangerous as the disease itself.

Christina, at first, displayed the basic symptoms of Lupus (mild to severe arthritis and sensitivity to the sun) and consulted a doctor for diagnosis and treatment. Knowing the disease was prevalent in the family, our goal was to treat the illness early and hopefully keep the disease at bay. The rheumatologist confirmed our thought and diagnosed Lupus. The treatment was mild steroid therapy. Her health and quality of life was not reduced. Therapy seemed to be working fine.

Christina became pregnant and delivered our most precious dream, our son Alex. The pregnancy was normal in almost every way. The one point of worry was the amount of fluid she retained in the final trimester. This is not rare, but the amount of fluid she had retained concerned the doctors. Christina and our son returned home and everything appeared to be fine. Approximately three months after Alex was born, Christina's symptoms had returned to such a severe level that she had to be hospitalized. The fluid retention had not abated; she had pneumonia and felt as if the very slightest joint movement was equivalent to the breaking of a bone.

Massive steroid treatment seemed to correct the problems. We were told Lupus patients sometimes have “flare-ups” after pregnancy. When she left the hospital we thought and hoped our troubles were behind us. Her steroid dose had been increased and unknown to us the real troubles were just beginning.

Since then Christina has been hospitalized too many times to count. She has been treated with every known medicine to combat Lupus and the symptoms brought on by Lupus. She has raised our son and actively participated in life while enduring severe pain, undergoing chemotherapy and numerous procedures and surgeries. Her lungs have been drained and operated on several times. She has seen her eyesight deteriorate from the steroids and underwent cataract surgery on both eyes twice. The steroids and other medicines have weakened her bones enough to be responsible for a severe broken hip, which required the installation of a rod and pins. Her hair has fallen out and her weight has fluctuated to extents almost unimaginable. Also complications associated with her illness led to a hysterectomy.

In 2001, she contracted an infection in her right hand. The infection spread so fast the doctors considered amputation from the elbow down. Her hand and arm was filleted open to expel the infection. Two months of surgery, procedures, hyperbaric therapy, numerous skin grafts and physical therapy enabled her to retain the use of her hand and fingers.

In 2003, her condition deteriorated even further when her kidneys failed. She commenced dialysis and a whole new battery of medicines was initiated. She was not aware during this hospital stay of the priest praying at her bedside. She spent 46 days in the hospital. Amazingly, her kidneys returned to working order in less than eight months. The future again seemed brighter, but the worst was still yet to come.

In October of 2004, she went to the hospital complaining of severe pain in her back, arms and upper legs. Before the doctors could determine the source of her pain, her heart and breathing had stopped. She was resuscitated; life flighted to Methodist Hospital in Houston and remained on a breathing machine and in the ICU for more than three weeks. This hospital stay lasted 68 days. The priest had returned to her bedside again. She was now battling Lupus and a new disorder called “Antiphospholipid Antibody.” Severe blood clotting had occurred scarring the heart, liver, kidneys and several areas on her skin, scarring the skin permanently. Her kidneys failed again and dialysis was commenced for the second time. Christina was unable to walk when released from the hospital, joint and muscle pain was severe and her spirit was almost broken.

To the amazement of everyone, each time Christina is struck by the disease she finds a way to pick herself up and continue on. When she broke her leg, her recovery time beat the doctor’s best estimate. When she left the hospital this last time, the doctors and therapists thought her legs might not work properly again. She taught herself to walk by working tirelessly and is still advancing her gate everyday. At times she is able to convince others she is perfectly healthy.

Christina’s most endearing qualities are by far her unbiased love and trust. Sadness sets in from time to time. She worries her fate will mirror her sister’s. Not being able to perform the simplest tasks when the disease flares up can be demoralizing. Being carried around or stricken to a wheel chair can depress even the strongest. One week she can perform activities as routinely as anyone, and the next week will bring severe pain and a trip to the ICU. But her will to live and the spark in her eyes will not diminish. Our son inspires and provides the fuel for Christina’s spirit. Her will to help others grows stronger everyday.

But the procedures, hospitals, doctors and clinics have exacted a toll on our family. Over the last nine years, Christina has spent more than 300 days in one hospital or another. Christina’s health insurance and the family’s finances have been exhausted. The opportunity presented by the Bright Light Foundation will enable Christina to reach her dreams.