

The day Kate was transferred from Shady Grove Hospital to hospice care, she dozed in bed in a room packed with people who loved her. We could hear a nurse talking in the hall, arranging for transport to Casey House later that afternoon--filling out forms over the phone--and she belted out Kate's full name to whomever she was talking with.

KATE THAXTON.

Kate's eyes popped open and she lifted her head, squinted toward the hallway, and yelled out. "NOT HERE!" Then, hearing no reaction from the nurse in the hallway, she settled back down onto her pillow, looked at me perched on the side of the mattress, and shook her head. "They don't get me around here," she said. Despite the circumstances, I cracked up.

I shouldn't have been surprised. Spending more than an hour or two with Kate always meant going home with slightly sore cheeks, from smiling and laughing so much. She was the light in any room and the life of any party, and completely unaware that the reason everyone else was having such a good time was usually because of her.

Kate and I met at work about 15 years ago, and I have to tell you, she wasn't, on appearance, someone I would have approached for friendship. She was stunningly beautiful, always impeccably dressed, and clearly very smart. She was the kind of person I normally find completely intimidating. But she introduced herself with a giant smile and her trademark "How are ya?" and quickly let her fun, goofy side shine through, and I was hooked. Because the most wonderful thing about Kate was that she clearly had no idea how amazing she was.

We'd known each other a few months when we left the office one afternoon and headed for Pentagon City to do a little shopping. Soon after we started wandering the mall, a man in a suit approached her, handed her a business card, and asked her to call him. I asked her what that was all about, and she just shook her head and crumpled up the bit of paper. "Oh, you know," she said. "One of those modeling scouts. Happens all the time. Don't you hate that?" Leaving me a few steps behind her, stammering, "Oh yeah. Totally annoying." And the funny thing was, she was completely serious. It never occurred to her that that sort of thing wasn't routine for everyone.

Two and a half years ago, I spent an unseasonably hot afternoon with her on a two-mile walk to raise money and awareness for the Pancreatic Cancer Action Network as part of Kate's "Ugly Shoes" team. Wearing heavy, dark purple T-shirts that were completely unreasonable for the weather that day, we walked downhill for a mile and then back uphill for another mile in the blazing sun, chatting and laughing with Thaxton family members and friends, joking about taking turns in my daughter's stroller to stave off heatstroke, and cheering for Kate when we reached our air-conditioned destination and she was introduced as a survivor. It wasn't until I read her blog the next day that I had any inkling of the challenge that walk presented for her--how uncomfortable she was hiking up the long hill in the sun, or how emotional she felt about the experience about a year into chemotherapy. But that was Kate. Always smiling, the first one with a clever

joke, and the person making sure everyone else had enough water to climb back up the hill.

Earlier this week, a friend said to me that most people can only hope to find one true, loyal friend in their lifetime. For me, as for many of you, that person was Kate. When the rest of the world seemed to lay in shambles as it sometimes does, Kate was always there. About three weeks ago, I wrote a note on her Facebook page, just in case she checked it but not thinking she'd have the energy. And the next morning, there was a note back from her, sending me her love in the middle of everything.

I've never seen a more beautiful bride than I saw on Kate's wedding day 10 years ago, and I've never seen one who had more fun at her own wedding or in the days leading up to it. Kate got us all to smile more, laugh louder, and broaden our own horizons as she tried every challenge she could find. She ran the Marine Corps Marathon. She went skydiving and jumped out of a perfectly good airplane, just to see how it felt. She loved exploring lakes and rivers in her kayak and she loved exploring trails and roads in her running shoes. And she took such joy in every moment of every day life. I remember the excited sparkle in her eye when she told me that she and Tim were getting their first apartment together, and then when they picked out a Sheltie puppy and brought him home, naming him Remy and spoiling him rotten. Kate introduced me to real sushi, jabbing me in the arm and calling me a sissy until I branched out beyond California Rolls, and convinced me to actually put something called seaweed salad in my mouth, and then swallow it. She got me off the couch--where I was perfectly happy--and exercising to Tae Bo, and she convinced me to try yoga. She addicted me to Coach handbags, but forbade me from buying their shoes. During our annual girls' night at the Bethesda Crabhouse years ago, she joined me in the merciless teasing of our friends from out of town who washed the Old Bay off their crabs and asked for butter instead of vinegar to dip the meat. She convinced me that Ann Taylor was an investment and not a splurge--my husband's still trying to un-do that particular nugget of wisdom. And when we'd go to lunch, she'd always order the healthiest thing on the menu, eat half of it, and then say with that devilish twinkle in her eyes, "You know, there's a Baskin Robbins over there..."

I don't know most of you and you've never met me before, but I've seen you all through Kate's eyes over the last few years and I can tell you that if you ever sent her a note, dashed off an email, commented on her blog, or checked in with her by phone, you brightened her world. She was always a little bit taken aback by so many sincere offers of help from so many people. Her co-workers at ASHA who filled her kitchen and her in-box long after she'd left the association amazed her. She loved you all and was so thankful for your favors and your friendship; she told me more than once that she didn't know how everyday life would go on without your help the past couple of years. She was also deeply grateful for everyone with Legg Mason who flexed and bent and rearranged to let Tim spend so much time by her side. She loved her dad and her brother and was thrilled by their calls and visits, and wished her battle wasn't so hard on them. And she told me, over and over, how very thankful she was to have the Thaxton family beside her as they tirelessly offered their support and love to her. They gave her

laughter-filled, normal feeling holidays, the weekend escapes that pulled her through the more difficult treatments, and absolutely amazing support over the last weeks; I can testify first-hand to that and tell you we should all be so fortunate to marry into a family like theirs. Through all of it, she had the love of her life in Tim, who never wavered in his support, and she knew how lucky she was that the universe had paired them together. I hope each of you knows how deeply your individual gestures touched her, and that you gave her the strength and desire to keep on fighting, even when the statistics were hopelessly skewed against her.

A few days before she went to Casey House, Kate told me she feared leaving this earth without a legacy, and that she felt like there was no one to pass her memories down to and no one who would treasure some of her possessions when she was gone. In the 15 years we knew each other, I can count on one hand the number of times Kate was wrong about anything, but this time, she was wrong. I know that because I look out over this room and see all of you, and know that she touched you somehow. I know it because I read her blog and the countless comments there from other cancer patients and their family members--people who never met her but were thankful for her words and her thoughts--and know they won't forget her. I'm more willing to try new things because of Kate. I'm a more positive thinker thanks to her. And I know that every person who ever crossed paths with her in her 37 years has a memory that lives on. Kate stretched our worlds and our imaginations. She pushed us when we needed it and opened her arms and her heart, even when our challenges paled in comparison to hers. She encouraged us all to be happier and more thankful, to let the little things, and some of the big things, slide, and showed us all that kindness and empathy and love could and should be kneejerk reactions to the people around us. Our worlds are all that much better for having known Kate. I can't imagine a greater legacy than that.