

# Journeys of Inspiration



*Rolf Benirschke was the placekicker for the San Diego Chargers for 10 seasons, but his career nearly ended because of a difficult battle with ulcerative colitis. He would require ileostomy surgery but returned to play in the NFL and has been educating and encouraging ostomy patients and WOC nurses ever since. His illness led him to start his patient engagement company, Legacy Health Strategies, and author three books, including his autobiography, *Alive & Kicking*. He is married and the father of four children, three with special needs. [www.rolfbenirschke.com](http://www.rolfbenirschke.com).*

Forever is a long time when you are only 24 years old. After battling through 13 surgeries and multiple infections, with the hope of reversing her ostomy following a particularly trying surgery which placed her on life support for a month, Valencia Hardaway awoke to the sound of her mother's soft crying at the side of her hospital bed.

As she lifted her heavy eyelids and struggled to regain consciousness through the fog of the anesthesia, she remembers thinking, "This is it, mom must be crying because my ostomy is permanent...I will have it for the rest of my life." What Valencia now proudly reflects back on as her "second chance at life" did not feel like a second chance at that time. It felt more like a death sentence.

## 24 and Happy

Valencia recalls never being sick as a child, somehow even avoiding catching chicken pox! She is one of the few who could honestly say at that point, "I haven't been sick a day in my life." After earning her master cosmetologist license, she and her aunt Dorothy opened a hair salon together: "D and V's."

Word spread quickly about their quality service and, what started as two chairs in a shared office space, rapidly grew into a burgeoning business. Valencia remembers that time in her life with a smile and a slight shake of her head, "I was 24 years old and I had a life. I worked at Georgia Tech part time and had my own salon. I had my own car. I had my own place, and I was happy."

One afternoon, in the middle of a bob haircut she was giving a new client, Valencia's stomach began to cramp, and she rushed to the bathroom and experienced a violent bout of diarrhea. Like many IBD patients, she dismissed it as the result of a bad burger or perhaps a case of the stomach flu. But since Valencia had never been sick before, she was totally unprepared for the helpless feelings and inability

to care for herself. Her health deteriorated quickly. It wasn't long before Valencia had to abandon her apartment and newfound freedom, to move back in with her mom. She was getting sicker and sicker and just didn't know what to do.

## It's Only Temporary

And so began the merry-go-round of medical visits, procedures, probes, rectal exams and confusing diagnoses that are all too common in IBD patients. Valencia resorted to sleeping by a portable heater in between twice-an-hour trips to bathroom, where she passed so much blood she would often collapse, too weak to make it back to her bed. Valencia's mom, Rosa, watched with horror as Valencia became increasingly weak and lethargic until she could stand by and wait no longer. She remembers quite literally, dragging Valencia out of bed to the car and into the doctor's office.

It did not take long for the medical staff to see there was something seriously wrong and rushed Valencia immediately to Dekalb Medical Hospital where she received ten units of blood. It was at Dekalb where she was finally diagnosed with ulcerative colitis by the gastroenterologist on call. He told her that her colon was so diseased, the only option was to remove it surgically. But, he assured her that the ostomy was only going to be temporary and that calmed Valencia's rising fears. She remembers consoling herself by saying, "I'm only going to have to wear the pouch for six weeks. I could never live with a pouch for the rest of my life."

On March 16, 1994 Valencia underwent her "temporary" ileostomy surgery. As she struggled with the intense pain and inconvenience of learning to use the pouch, she simply repeated to herself, "It's only temporary, it's only temporary, it's only temporary." Unfortunately, two months later, Valencia was facing another surgery for a fistula and her flicker of hope sputtered and was replaced by a deep

exhaustion coupled with despair. She still refused to acknowledge the pouch, turning her face away when her mother changed it for her. In her words, she simply wanted to die.

### Life Support

But she did not die and would endure 10 more surgeries between March and December of 1994. After the tenth surgery, things looked especially bleak for Valencia. Infection had settled in her lungs and she was put on life support to help her breathe. It was at that point that Rosa, her mom, faced the most difficult decision any parent can be asked to make. Should she discontinue life support and end her daughter's suffering or hold on for a little bit longer hoping things might change?

Rosa was forced to stand by and watch her daughter deteriorate to the point where she could not even take a breath on her own. It was at that unimaginable crossroad, that Rosa handed her daughter's life over to God one more time and prayed, "Lord, her life is in your hands. If you want to take her, go ahead, because I cannot make the decision to take her off life support on my own." And then, after sleeping on two chairs pushed together in the waiting room at the hospital and brushing her teeth in the sink in the ladies' bathroom for a month, Rosa finally went home where she continued to pray. A few days later, Valencia's fever finally broke and the spark of hope was ignited again.

After being hospitalized and sick for so long Valencia's recovery was painfully slow and grueling. Even getting up to sit in a chair was difficult and breathing on her own was excruciating. She had to learn how to walk again and build up all the muscles in her legs that had atrophied. It was a slow and painful time, but despite the daily drudgery of it all, Valencia embraced her second chance to live and prayed, "Lord, thank you for giving me a chance to live. If I survive, I promise I will spend the rest of it investing in other people and sharing your love."

### New Gratitude

After a few more surgeries and subsequent infections in 2006, Valencia underwent a total colectomy

and her 12-year "temporary" ostomy became "permanent." But now, instead of viewing it as death sentence like she had previously, Valencia was determined to live her best life. Looking into the future, she challenged herself and said, "I want to see how beautiful and fabulous I can be with my pouch. In fact, I'm going to be the 'baddest' chick with an ostomy pouch in the whole world."

For many, ostomy surgery is the beginning of their second chance at life and once through that initial adjustment period, they return to doing all the things they did before their surgery with a new appreciation and gratitude for life. And so it was with Valencia. But life isn't always fair, even for the toughest survivors.

### New Challenge

Today, Valencia is facing a new challenge — liver cancer that was diagnosed in 2016.

Her initial response was, "Oh no, here we go..." and then she spoke with her family and began to pray through her fears by saying, "Lord, your track record is good with me. I know you have the power to heal me because you have done it before. Show me how to live your plan."

Since then, Valencia has adopted a very healthy diet and takes vitamins and supplements to combat the inflammation and is currently on the liver transplant list. When asked what her plans are for the future, a big smile erupts on her face as she confidently says, "I want to spend the rest of my life being an example to others. I want to sit by someone's bedside who has just gone through ostomy surgery and say, 'It's going to be OK. I went through this and I know you can too. I can help you. I can show you what to do.' I really believe I can help people and inspire them to make the most of their second chance."

From my perspective, Valencia already is an inspiration and will continue to inspire others for the rest of her life! Thanks, Valencia for what you mean to me and all the people whose lives you have touched.

To help Valencia with costs related to her liver transplant, go to <https://gatransplant.org/> and then click on "Individual Fundraising" under "Transplant Fundraising." Then enter Valencia Hardaway in the search form. 🍀



Valencia Hardaway with her mother Rosa.