

Evelyn Brooks

Roanoke, Virginia

Mother of Paula, Who Died of Meningococcal Disease

Evelyn Brooks of Roanoke, Virginia, had studied meningococcal disease while in nursing school but never suspected such a rare, yet potentially fatal, disease could strike her 21-year-old daughter, Paula, a senior at the University of Missouri. Evelyn and her husband were awoken one night in February 1999 by a phone call they never imagined receiving – a phone call from the emergency room saying Paula was very sick.

Paula's fight against the disease began that morning when she came down with flu-like symptoms. Paula called her mom complaining of a sore throat and high fever, but assured Evelyn some of her friends also were battling the flu. Undaunted by her daughter's symptoms, Evelyn assured her she would be feeling better in a few days.

Unfortunately, what Paula had was much worse than the flu. After appearing listless and vomiting violently, friends rushed Paula to the emergency room. Doctors performed a spinal tap, confirming Paula had meningococcal meningitis, a vaccine-preventable disease that strikes adolescents and young adults.

Evelyn and her husband did not know they could have helped protect their daughter from meningococcal meningitis by having her immunized. They did not know that by living in crowded living conditions like a college dorm Paula was at an increased risk for the disease. Doctors informed the Brooks family Paula was responding well to antibiotics and they had caught the disease in the early stages. Yet, within a few hours, Paula's condition began to deteriorate.

Doctors placed Paula on a ventilator as her organs started to fail. Her skin was purple and her face, legs and arms were mottled. Paula's severe state developed only 24 hours after noticing her sore throat. Evelyn and her husband frantically tried to get a flight out to Missouri to be with their ailing daughter. By the time they were able to get to the college, Paula was brain dead and on life support.

After a painful decision, the Brooks chose to remove their daughter from the ventilator. Paula died of meningococcal disease just three months before her college graduation. In Paula's honor, the University granted her degree posthumously because she had worked as an ambassador for the school of journalism.

Evelyn joined the National Meningitis Association's "Moms on Meningitis" program to help educate other families in Roanoke about the dangers of meningococcal disease and prevention methods, including immunization.

A vaccine to help prevent meningococcal disease is approved for use by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration among persons aged 2 to 55 years. The vaccine protects against four of the major strains of the disease.

Anyone can get meningococcal disease, but adolescents and young adults are increased risk for contracting the disease. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommends meningococcal immunization for all adolescents 11 through 18 years of age, and college freshmen living in dormitories.

“If I knew then what I do now about meningococcal disease and how deadly it can be, I would have had Paula vaccinated,” said Evelyn. “As a parent, you want to do everything you can to protect your children.” Her hope is by telling her story, no other parent will have to lose his or her child to this devastating disease.

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