

## cindy crawford

# healing hands

*A devoted daughter turns a personal loss into a passionate commitment to help others care for loved ones with cancer*

I was 8 when my 2-year-old brother Jeff was diagnosed with leukemia, and almost 10 when he passed away. I can remember being aware that he was really sick and somehow knowing he was going to die—even though I don't think anyone actually told us that. I also saw the toll that caring for a sick child took on my parents. They wanted to keep Jeff out of the hospital as much as possible, so on the days he got radiation or chemotherapy it would be a two-hour drive each way between our home in De Kalb, Ill., and Madison, Wis., plus another two hours at the University of Wisconsin Children's Hospital. You know, my son, Presley, is 3, and I can't even imagine how hard that must have been.

My mom, Jennifer [who was divorced from Cindy's dad, Dan, in 1982], was so strong. Even when my parents took Jeff to the hospital, she'd rush home to get dinner on the table. She just went on autopilot because she had four kids to feed, bathe and get to bed. My mother tried to do it all herself. But my sisters and I could see how stressed out my parents were.

My family's experience is the major reason I became involved with Strength for Caring: It's an organization that works with local health-care facilities to help families and friends who care for cancer patients. It's a support system, a network that allows you to meet other people dealing with the same things. You also get practical information. So much caregiving is done at home—and a lot of times it involves medical stuff. Strength for Caring can teach you how to change a bed for someone who's too weak to get out of it, or plan a diet to alleviate the nausea of chemotherapy. They also give you the confidence to talk to doctors, so you don't just sit in the office and go, "OK, OK," then walk out feeling confused. You learn how to make sure your questions are answered in a way you can understand.

I wish something like this had been available years ago. Back then my mother didn't know a lot of people who were faced with the

"She's an incredibly strong woman," Crawford says of her mom, Jennifer Moluf, who lost son Jeff to cancer when he was almost 4.



same physical and emotional challenges, so that made it hard. I talk about my family's experience on the Strength for Caring Web site because in a situation like this, hearing from someone who has been there makes it a little easier to cope. For example, I know from being pregnant that only another pregnant woman can talk to me in the right way about what I'm going through.

Since we lost Jeff I've really come to appreciate the value of sharing. Every five years I go back to the University of Wisconsin Children's Hospital, where Jeff was treated, for a reunion of cancer survivors, people who fought cancer as kids. Many are now young adults, and I can see how much they need each other, because they've all had the same experience. They need to see other survivors raising their hands and saying, "Yeah, I'm here too!"

Let's face it—most people don't say, "Hey, I want to take care of someone with cancer." They just find themselves thrust into the role. And that's the whole point of Strength for Caring: It helps family members feel less alone and overwhelmed. It's important to know that it's OK to ask for help. To ask someone to bring your family dinner once a week so you don't have to worry about a meal that night, or to ask them to run errands. Cancer doesn't affect just the patient; it affects the entire family. And taking care of yourself is one of the most important things you can do for those you love. —as told to Monica Corcoran

*If you would like to learn more about Strength for Caring, or find a program in a town near you, visit [strengthforcaring.com](http://strengthforcaring.com).*