

# in sickness and in health

By Sarah Angle Photos by Ralph Lauer

Thirty days before Natasha Logan was to marry Larry Elkins at a small chapel in Keller, she was diagnosed with a rare form of cancer; the tumor was located behind her left eye. Natasha was 23. Larry was 25.



Larry Elkins with son Seth, who never knew his mom when she wasn't sick. Says Larry of his late wife: "She was amazing. She was kind. She was her."

Natasha told Larry to leave — to find a girl who would be able to live a full life. "She tried to push me away," says Larry. But Larry pushed back.

"I had to explain to her that when I got down on my knee, I wasn't just proposing for the good times — I was proposing to marry her for the good times and the bad."

Their love story begins in Spanish class at Haltom High School during Larry's senior year. He was a football player: soft-spoken, funny and handsome, with hazel eyes framed by long blond eyelashes.

Natasha sat next to him and would ask to borrow a mechanical pencil almost every day. He just couldn't resist.

Her smile was mischievous and warm at the same time, and she burst into laughter often and without reservation.

The two didn't start dating until after Natasha graduated from high school in 2000. They kissed on their first date, sitting in her dad's truck outside Larry's house. They had gone to see *Runaway Bride*.

Before Larry got out of the truck, she told him, "You know, you're going to marry me one day."

She just seemed so sure of herself, Larry remembers, smiling.

There was a brief lull in their romance, and the couple split. Natasha wanted to know she could live independently and felt like Larry was taking care of her too much. But a year later, in 2002, they got back together. She moved into Larry's Fort Worth apartment.

Natasha was working in a Mexican restaurant in Haltom City when Larry showed up and got down on his knee. He had rehearsed a poetic proposal but barely had a chance to speak



Natasha had to wear an eye patch due to the cancer. When questioned by little kids about it, she told them she was a good pirate.


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## Real Life



Family photos in Seth's room; it's hard to find one where Natasha isn't smiling.

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before Natasha jumped into his arms in affirmation.

It was the spring of 2004. Wedding plans were well under way and a Caribbean honeymoon was already booked when Natasha went in for surgery to repair a deviated septum. During the surgery, the doctor noticed that a tumor had broken her nasal cavity wall, so he took a biopsy.

A few days later, they met with the doctor.

The MRIs showed what appeared to be a thick layer of moss starting behind her left eye and growing furiously down her cheekbone and into her carotid artery. That moss was a very rare adenocarcinoma cancer. And it was extensive.

**Little moments come back to you** in flashes, says Larry. "I remember us listening to music in the car and flipping through the stations on the radio and asking each other: 'What's this song saying to us?'"

Natasha opted for experimental radiation at a specialized cancer hospital in Seattle. They cancelled the wedding, and she started treatment immediately. Larry went to Seattle and stayed as long as he could.

Natasha was there for two months. The treatment for the cancer was almost as horrible as the disease. Every day, her head had to be screwed down to a table where a needlepoint laser beam would pulse directional radiation into a precise portion of her brain to kill the cancer without obliterating her eyesight.

Back in Fort Worth, Larry kept busy with research. Natasha had the rarest form of the cancer called adenoid cystic carcinoma, which typically starts in the nasal cavity. It grows slowly, but the cancer usually metastasizes to other parts of the body, such as the lungs. Larry began to grasp the reality of their situation. Natasha's time was growing short, as life expectancy for most patients was five years. Larry grew even more resolute in his

love for Natasha. "It was something we were going to deal with together and get through."

Like any couple, Larry and Natasha had fights. Silly disagreements. Hurt feelings.

"But I didn't want to be upset," Larry says. "Because we didn't have time."

The radiation burned Natasha's face and left her with what appeared to be a permanent black eye. Cataracts and blindness typically follow treatment.

Larry wasn't sure if she would go blind before she died of cancer. One outcome was inevitable; both were probable.

In 2005, almost one year after Natasha was diagnosed with cancer, the couple got married at a church in Haltom City. Her dress was bright white with a beaded bodice and full skirt; she wore pearls and held a bouquet of roses. They danced to "At Last," by Etta James.

The cancer treatment had already left its mark on her face, leaving that black ring around her eye. She would have to wait a year for her body to be clear of radiation before trying to get pregnant. In 2006, Natasha gave birth to their son, Seth.

The cancer continued to ravage her body. In 2008, she had surgery to remove tumors from



The wedding was postponed but, one year after Natasha's diagnosis, she and Larry got married.

both lungs.

"She wanted to hold Seth, but she couldn't pick him up," Larry says. So instead, Larry would place Seth into Natasha's arms, and the 2-year-old would lie perfectly still, instinctively knowing that he needed to be careful with his mommy.

She also continued to work. She was a clerk in labor relations at BNSF Railway; Larry works as an analyst at the engineering company. While she developed deep friendships with her co-

workers, her best friend, Larry, was just a short walk away.

**Family pictures and crosses** cover the walls in the Elkinses' home in north Fort Worth. Natasha decorated the refrigerator and kitchen bulletin board with inspirational quotes written on bright sticky notes: "God promises to be in control of every storm."

In 2010, it was time to try chemotherapy; the tumors in her lungs were growing faster.

Larry shaved his wife's head, giving Natasha a little bit of control over something that she was powerless to stop. "Of course," Larry says, "she looked good with short hair."

At her next doctor's appointment, Natasha insisted on knowing how much time she had left. There was no easy answer.

"You're so happy. You're upbeat and positive. You have a good support system in place," the doctor said. "Even though you're worse off than a lot of my patients, I can't tell you how long, because you're so unpredictable, and so is your cancer."

He offered to give her a ballpark number. "It doesn't matter what you tell me; I'm going to pass it by one day," Natasha said.

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"I know you will," said the doctor.

Larry says that despite everything, Natasha saw her cancer as a gift. "She lived life to the fullest every day because she knew she had a limited amount of time." Among all the bad news, she did have a bright spot when she got to see her son start kindergarten.

Tired of being sick from chemotherapy treatments that didn't seem to be working, she stopped treatments in 2012 but never gave up hope that she would survive.

"She had made peace with it," Larry says.

Soon after that, the doctor told her that her lungs were inoperable. The tumors were just too big.

**Sitting at their round kitchen table**, Larry and Natasha would make jokes and laugh, talk to Seth about school, eat dinner together, and then, when it was just them, discuss what was worth giving up to prolong her life.

Natasha always had to decide.

She regretted having the surgery that left her with a titanium plate after they removed her left cheekbone and all the surrounding muscle tissue, along with her left sinus cavity, some teeth and her top left palate. She didn't recognize herself in the mirror.

"I don't know how many times I wished I could've taken a little bit of that pain," Larry says.

Instead, he gave his wife every ounce of himself. Meanwhile, he tried to shield Seth from the sadness that permeated their lives, while still being honest about his mother's condition.

Natasha had been sick Seth's whole life; he didn't know any differently. "Mommy has cancer. Mommy is sick," he would say, matter-of-factly, when asked by his grief counselor if he knew what was happening to his mother. "I know that my mommy might — no, wait — I know that my mommy will go to heaven."

Larry had seen great examples of love, like his great-grandfather, who didn't dare leave his wife's

side and gently kissed her forehead every day that she was in hospice care; and his parents, who have been married for 36 years. He believes life prepares you for what's to come.

**"On Friday, I was informed that the cancer was growing again. I have one tumor next to my right eye, a tumor sitting under my brain, three tumors on my left lung, and 11 on my right [lung]. I know, crazy, right?"** This is what Natasha wrote on her Facebook page on Sept. 19, 2012.

"I know this all sounds extremely heavy, but the Lord works in amazing ways. In February, my husband and I prayed and came to the decision not to seek treatment any longer. At some point, quality becomes more important ... no matter what lies ahead, I know God has it all under control. Thank you all and remember to keep dreaming big."

Last May, Natasha started hospice care at home. She wanted to be near her family, and she wanted her own bed.

She slept most of the days, and Nov. 20 was no different. But that night around 7:30, she got up. Natasha was now completely blind, and Seth helped her walk down the hall. She asked her son for some ice cream.



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Larry and Seth had been watching *How to Train Your Dragon 2*. There's a part in the movie where the dad dies; Natasha asked Larry if they'd already passed that part. He said yes.

Then she told Seth, "You know, I'm going to pass away soon, and you've got to be prepared. It's going to be OK. You and your dad are going to move on."

Then she started crying.

Larry asked Seth to go take his shower and get ready for bed.

Natasha started calling people, her sister, her best friend. When she got off the phone, she was crying, but she was hungry. Larry made her Chef Boyardee beef ravioli, because that's what she wanted. She dropped some of the pasta onto her pants, because she couldn't see, but still wanted to be able to feed herself independently. Larry changed her clothes. Between tears, she told him: "I'm happy to be your wife. You've cared for me. You've loved me."

"We sat at the table and talked for a while ... we had a good talk," Larry says.

Then he walked Natasha back to their bed — they laughed together — and they went to sleep holding hands. At some point in the middle of the night, she got up. Around 5 a.m., Larry found her on the floor; she had been trying to get to Seth's room.

"I picked her up and carried her back to the bed. I cried. I tried to shake her awake and called her name," Larry says. Seth heard his dad crying and asked if everything was OK. "I think mommy passed away," Larry told him. "Then I sat there and I hugged him."

It was Larry's turn to make phone calls; parents, hospice workers and Seth's counselor all came to the house.

The hospice nurse asked Seth if he wanted to draw his mommy a picture or write her a card to take with her. Using crayons, the 7-year-old drew a cross and decorated it. Above the cross in big

letters, he wrote: "Happy Day." Natasha had always told Seth it was going to be a happy day when she went to heaven.

A bowl with gift cards from the funeral sits on the kitchen counter and the Christmas tree is still up mid-January as Seth and Larry ease into the new year without Natasha. Photos of her are everywhere, from framed shots of their wedding to silly photo-booth pictures of a smiling Larry and Natasha with an eye patch. Her inspirational notes remain pinned to the bulletin board, while her Clinique lotion and cleanser collect dust on the bathroom sink.

In December, members of the KISS-FM Kidd Kraddick Morning Show who had heard about the Elkinses surprised the guys with a houseful of Christmas gifts, season tickets to the Dallas Mavericks, a trip to Disney World and much more.

While Larry acknowledges that these things will help create new happy memories with Seth, father and son also are content to stay at home and watch a movie or play video games together. It's all part of making the best life with the time you have, something Natasha did better than anybody else — and something Larry will never forget. **36**



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