

Sharing tale of tragedy, faith & hope

By Julie Mullen For The Courier-News Feb 28, 2011 10:22PM



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Former Buffalo Bills quarterback Jim Kelly and wife Jill talk about their courtship during an interview with Pastor Jim Nicodem Saturday at Christ Community Church in St. Charles. Mary Beth Nolan—For Sun-Times Media

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ST. CHARLES TWP. — Starting in four consecutive Super Bowls and being inducted into the NFL's Hall of Fame is stuff that dreams are made of, admitted former Buffalo Bills quarterback Jim Kelly.

But he said he would have given it all up for the health of his son, Hunter, who died of a rare neurological disease in 2005.

"I had the game plan all mapped out," Kelly said. "I dreamed of what every father dreams of ... tossing the football in the backyard with my son."

Kelly and his wife, Jill, shared their story of fame, love, heartbreak and hope for the future during church services Saturday and Sunday at Christ Community Church.

Jim Kelly played professional football from 1986 to his retirement in 1996 and was inducted into the NFL's Hall of Fame in 2002 in front of 80,000 screaming fans.

"I prayed every day that Hunter would be there when I was inducted," Kelly said. "Him being there with me was all that mattered."

Kelly, raised Catholic, described how he turned away from God after Hunter's death but also how — with the help of his wife — his faith ultimately helped heal his broken heart.

"I was mad ... and I wasn't being a good father, or a good husband," Kelly told the crowd of several hundred people. "But I realized the only way I'm going to see Hunter again is if I'm a changed man."

Pushing screenings

Hunter's Hope foundation was established in 1997 by the couple after Hunter was diagnosed as an infant with Krabbe Leukodystrophy, an inherited fatal nervous system disease.

While most children with the rare disorder typically do not reach their second birthday, Hunter lived to be 8½ years old, but he struggled for every breath he took and never spoke a word.

Following Hunter's death, Jill wrote the New York Times bestselling book, "Without a Word: How a Boy's Unspoken Love Changed Everything." It described how the Kelly family was rescued by God in the darkest of times.

Besides raising funds for research, the couple now goes state to state speaking to lawmakers to advocate a mandated full panel of newborn screenings, which would identify disease early on so that children can receive any available therapy.

"Our mission is to give every child a chance," Kelly said. "Too many kids are getting their lives cut short."

Although there is no cure for Krabbe Disease, early detection can mean early treatment, Jill said.

"While there was no treatment for Hunter, there is a viable treatment now, which is a cord blood transplant," Jill said. "If you catch the disease as soon as possible, you can prolong their life."

But the main message over the weekend for the Kellys — who also have daughters, Erin, 15, and Camryn, 11 — was about finding God and experiencing redemption in the midst of darkness.

Kelly told the crowd of church members and football fans that it's "cool to be Christian" and people don't have to give up who they are to follow Christ.

"I still like to hang out with my friends and have a good time," Kelly said. "I haven't changed ... but my heart did."