Wife of former NFLer writes about son

In excerpt from ‘Without a Word,’ she writes about the events leading up to her son’s birth

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Jill Kelly, wife of football Hall of Famer Jim Kelly, reveals her family’s struggle with having a severely disabled, terminally ill son, Hunter, and how he profoundly impacted their lives. In this excerpt from “Without a Word,” Jill writes about her son’s birth.

It’s hard to describe the emotions wrapped up in the day. After devoting heart, soul, and life to the game of football, my husband, Jim, had decided to hang up his football cleats. After four Super Bowl appearances, four AFC Championships, six AFC East Championships, and five Pro Bowl invitations, “K-Gun Kelly” would no longer lead the Buffalo Bills as their quarterback.

Throng of teammates and fans as well as family members and friends filled the Buffalo Bills Fieldhouse on that brisk afternoon. I vividly remember walking through the back entrance and slowly making our way across the artificial turf to the front end of the building where the temporary platform and podium stood. It was impossible not to think about the countless hours that Jim had spent here.

It was also difficult to comprehend what our life would be like without football as the focus. My heart ached for Jim; his life had intimately revolved around this game since he was a boy, and now he was walking away. Football defined Jim—it defined our family. Our lives were consumed with the sport and the passionate man who played it so well: my husband. The more I thought about the uncertainty of the future, the more anxious I became. I didn’t know what to say to Jim as we walked across the field, so I just held his hand.

Noisy chatter from fans and media anticipating Jim’s farewell ceremony surrounded us as we approached the curtain behind the stage that separated Jim from his devoted well-wishers. Jim paused to compose himself before taking the stage and reviewed his speech one last time. Meanwhile, I watched and waited for our cue to enter the roped-off area.

It was an unprecedented moment. For years, Jim had calmly handled the weekly pressure and scrutiny associated with being the quarterback of the Bills, but at this point, he was a nervous wreck. However, he had gone over his retirement speech with the same fervor and energy he had once poured into studying his playbook and pregame film, so he was ready—just as he had been on all of those game-day Sundays when taking the field in front of eighty thousand diehard Buffalo Bills fans.

We were given the cue, and it was time. Time for Jim to walk away from the game he loved, the game he lived for each and every Sunday, the game that had shaped our family for so many years.

“Well, I guess this is it,” Jim said solemnly as he took my hand.

We made our way up to the platform while
hundreds of fans cheered and shouted.

"You're the best, Jimbo!" one man hollered.

"We'll miss you, Jim!" another shouted.

When the crowd of adoring enthusiasts finally quieted, we all listened intently as team owner Ralph Wilson and head coach Marv Levy made their opening remarks. Each talked about Jim's many accomplishments and expressed gratitude for the man who wore number 12. The heart and soul of the Buffalo Bills football team, my husband, Jim, was retiring. It just didn't seem real.

Especially since we knew Jim could still play and win. He was as tough, driven, and passionate as ever. Both Dan Marino and John Elway—Jim's fellow members of the NFL draft class of 1983—were still suiting up for their respective teams. But Bills management had determined that it was time for new direction at the quarterback position. Believing the franchise needed some younger blood, the Bills dynasty had regrouped and was looking for someone fresh to take the snaps. A new hero.

In his eleven seasons with the team, Jim had been that hero. He'd put Buffalo on the NFL map and brought life to the city and its thousands of fans with his gritty performances each Sunday. He had also grown to love Western New York and its people. So while other teams had expressed interest in Jim once the Bills had announced their decision, Jim wasn't about to pour his life into a new offense no matter how much they would pay him. His heart was sold out to Buffalo; no other team would do. And though it hurt deeply, Jim accepted the front office's decision with the same class, grace, and toughness that had characterized his career.

What would the Bills do now? I wondered. What would the city of Buffalo do? What would Jim do? With so many questions running through my mind, I could only imagine what was going through Jim's.

As he began his retirement speech, the strain and the difficulty of stepping away was written all over his face. Nevertheless, Jim delivered his farewell with poise, though choked with emotion at times.

"This is going to be tough," he began, "and I thought saying my wedding vows was tough." Jim laughed as he glanced over at me. In that moment, I thought back to our wedding day and how emotional Jim was when he said his vows. He had indeed struggled to hold back tears during our ceremony, which was shocking. As we stood together now on the Fieldhouse podium before so many fans who loved Jim, it was obvious that leaving the game he loved so passionately was moving him deeply.

"First of all, I want to thank you all for coming," he said, "I have a few words to say to not only my teammates but to all the fans in Buffalo, and to the media, and to everybody who's been not just a Jim Kelly fan but a fan of my family."

I stood next to Jim and tried my best not to look out at the entire Kelly family all lined up in the first row. I knew if I caught their gaze, I would lose it.

"As you might imagine, this hasn't been easy," Jim stated. "I've had to make the most difficult decision of my entire life. I've been playing the game of football for over twenty-eight years. Many of my dreams have been fulfilled, many goals have been achieved, but most important to me, I've been able to take care of the people I love. So today, I stand before you to officially announce my retirement from the Buffalo Bills and the National Football League."

And then Jim stopped, his eyes filling with tears long withheld. Then I started crying. Of course, my being nine months pregnant didn't help.

Jim took a deep breath, pulled himself together, then continued with his speech.
As I glanced out at the hundreds of fans who had come to witness this monumental day for Jim and the Buffalo Bills organization, I was moved. It was such a tribute to Jim and all that he had done for the franchise. He had accomplished so much and given all he had to the team and its dedicated fans—and they knew it.

The tears were many that day, yet our family had much to look forward to. We had retirement plans, which sounded very strange because Jim was still in his thirties and I was just twenty-seven. And in spite of the sense of loss we felt at leaving football, our sorrow and uncertainty were countered by the excitement of expecting our second child, who would be arriving in two short weeks.

I knew exactly what would ease Jim's heartache at giving up the game he loved: telling him that he was about to hold the son he had always wanted. I had made the decision to surprise him and keep it a secret. I couldn't wait to place our baby boy in those strong, battle-scarred hands that had held a football for so long.

With our first baby, Erin Marie, we had found out in advance that we were expecting a girl, but the second time around we had decided to wait—or at least Jim thought we had. Are you kidding me? I couldn't bear not knowing, so when Jim couldn't make it to one of my routine sonograms, I seized the opportunity to find out for myself. When the doctor told me she saw a little something extra between the baby's legs, I could hardly contain myself. We were going to have the son my husband had longed for!

I'd been hoping for a boy for Jim's sake. He came from a family of six boys and no girls, so you can imagine the pressure. Jim's younger brother Danny was soon to have his first child. Two of Jim's older brothers also had boys, as did Danny's twin, Kevin. So, naturally, the NFL superstar in the family was expected to have a boy, too.

The anticipation was excruciating. I wanted to tell Jim so badly because he was deeply wounded about retiring, and—as tough as he was—the pain of the decision was obvious. Still, to my amazement, I managed to keep quiet those final two weeks.

Then, early in the morning on February 14, 1997—Valentine's Day—my water broke and the contractions began. They intensified during the thirty-minute ride to the hospital, making it seem as though the drive took hours. One thing was on my mind: getting that child out of my dreams and into my arms.

As soon as we walked through the emergency room doors at the hospital, a nurse helped me into the nearest wheelchair, and off we went. I received a routine epidural as my contractions intensified. Thankfully, my labor only lasted a few hours, and even though my focus was on pushing, I was eager to see Jim's reaction once he saw our son.

"It's a boy!" the doctor exclaimed.

Jim's response was priceless: he shouted over and over, "It's a boy! It's a boy!" Although my mind and body were spent, waves of joy filled my heart as I watched Jim erupt with excitement and pride. As family quarterback, Jim was the MVP. He'd remained by my side during the entire delivery, making sure all the right plays were called to address my every need. Jim witnessed the entire birth, cut the umbilical cord, and supervised every move the doctors and nurses made. Now, after a quick kiss on my forehead, he was out the door to grab my parents, who were patiently waiting in the hall. Tears of joy streamed down my face. "Daddy's little boy is finally here."

My mom and dad walked into the room, smiling from ear to ear. "I can't believe it's a boy," Mom said as she leaned over to hug me. My dad stood close by and just shook his head, stammering, "Wow." Jim couldn't sit still, so he followed the doctors over to the table where they weighed our son and performed all the newborn baby procedures mothers are usually too wiped out to pay attention to.
After an uneventful pregnancy and fairly easy delivery, the son that Daddy had always dreamed of—the baby destined to be an NFL protégé—finally arrived...a day before his actual due date, yet right on time: on his daddy’s thirty-seventh birthday.

No birthday present could compare to the gift of a son. We were amazed and overwhelmed with joy. Our seven-pound, fourteen-ounce dream come true measured twenty-one-and-a-half inches long, and I don’t mind telling you, he was strikingly handsome.

I let Jim name each of our children. I had picked out plenty of girls’ names but boys’ names were not as easy to come by. Because of Jim’s love for hunting he was determined to name our son Hunter. And so it was, the new rookie was put on the family roster as Hunter James Kelly.

While Hunter was getting acquainted with all the other newborns in the nursery, Jim started working the phones. One of the first people he called was teammate Thurman Thomas, the unstoppable running back who was inducted into the Pro Football Hall of Fame in 2007. Thurman was Jim’s go-to guy on the field and also a close personal friend. At first, I thought it was a little odd that Jim would call him before any of his brothers, but his intentions immediately became clear. Thurman and his wife, Patti, had three girls, so being a kid at heart, Jim wanted to rub it in. He was relentless in his quest to rattle Thurman with the good news.

Thurman didn’t answer the first time, so Jim left a message. However, boys will be boys, so one call wasn’t enough. He placed two more calls, leaving the same message every time: “Oh, did I tell you that I had a son, a boy, born on my birthday? Just in case you didn’t hear me the first time, I had a boy, yes, a boy.”

Hunter’s future was set in stone and the playbook for his life was written. He would play football. He would go hunting. He and his daddy would do all the things that fathers and sons do together. And Jim would be there, guiding Hunter every step of the way. The two would be inseparable. This was going to be a relationship that every boy would long to have with his father: a relationship to behold, to envy, to respect.

It didn’t take long for the media to catch wind of the good news and gather at the hospital, hoping to hear firsthand about Team Kelly’s new rookie. After Jim was certain that Hunter and I were comfortable, he stepped out to address the curious reporters. With something much more important than football to talk about, he could hardly contain his enthusiasm. It was the birthday he would never forget, for he had been given the most precious gift in the world. Not even a Super Bowl win could compare to this triumph.

Before Jim walked out the door, I smiled at him and said, “Happy birthday.” Then I smuggled Hunter close, stared into his eyes, and whispered, “You are a gift.”

Finally alone with my son, I explored every inch of his tiny body to make sure everything was okay. The nurse had assured me that Hunter passed all the mandatory newborn screening tests with flying colors, but examining his little body for myself was a must. It’s a mom thing. If you’ve held your own baby after giving birth, then you know.

Fresh out of the womb, Hunter’s body looked strong and solid. His facial features were beautiful, with the cutest little nose, perfect lips, and big, bluish-green, almond-shaped eyes that sparkled. His skin was flawless and radiant, and he had such a full head of dark brown hair that he could have made his daddy jealous.

I’ll never forget those first few moments alone with my son. Hunter captured my heart.
immediately, and I just knew he was destined to be extraordinary.
And in those few peaceful moments in the hospital, as I held Hunter . . .

Everything was perfect.

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