



Deciding *when* to die

Amber Meyst-Gummere courtesy photos

Angel wings were added to Krista's wedding picture by Diane Graham Photography.

Woman with cancer chooses Death with Dignity

BY LESLIE KELLY

For the Bainbridge Island Review

Editor's note: This story of a young woman's choice to end her life of pain through assisted suicide was written by interviewing family members and reading posts from her personal Facebook page.

Krista Joy's Facebook page March 15, 2021:

"I've chosen March 27 as the day I will leave this earth. I will drink something, go to sleep and wake up in Heaven."

And with that, Krista Joy Murphy chose Death with Dignity.

At age 41, and after more than six months of fighting Stage 4 kidney cancer, she was done. The pain was too great. The tumors that had spread to her spine were causing her to not be able to stand or walk. Tumors were pressing on her ribs and digging into her lungs making it hard to breathe.

The former Bainbridge Island Realtor, performer, waitress and floral clerk at Town & Country Market had been dealing with some kind of pain since before Aug. 24, 2020, when she received her diagnosis. Her doctor gave her six months at best.

Krista was a California girl, growing up in Lake Arrowhead east of Los Angeles, loving the sun and the beach. When the family moved to the mountains she and her sisters loved to play in the snow. They rode their bikes and played games outside. She was the middle of three girls; her sister, Amber Meyst-Gummere, was older by two years



Krista Joy Murphy and sister Amber Meyst-Gummere on their way home from Hawaii.

and sister Luann Monteleone-Grinnell was younger by two years. The three were close - to the end.

In middle school, Krista was shy, Amber said, but came out of her shell by high school. She loved to write poetry and played guitar. Later, Krista developed her singing voice. She

graduated from the Rim of the World High School and then studied at the College of the Sequoias in Visalia south of Fresno.

A petite blonde, she left California to find her place in the world and eventually ended up near Bainbridge Island with her first husband. While the marriage didn't last, her love

of Bainbridge did. She put down roots. She bought a small house on the water in nearby Suquamish and went to work selling houses. It was a career she loved. She worked for a number of real estate firms, always making a name for herself. Many knew her as "the singing Realtor."

When she packed up to go to an Open House, she took her guitar and while people came and went Krista would play and sing. Many compared her to Eva Cassidy. Their voices were similar, and they looked alike. And, as it ended up, Eva also died of cancer.

Krista sang at open mic nights in and around Bainbridge, often at Pegasus Coffee House, where she also waitressed from time to time. When the economy was slow, and houses weren't selling, Krista was creative about making money. She loved flowers and worked for a time at the flower stand inside Town & County in Winslow. Her long-term dream was to open her own flower shop.

Her life was happy. She was successful at selling houses and loved seeing families find their perfect home. She had many friends and an active social life, but never seemed to find the right man. She came close a couple of times, but the timing was always off and things didn't work out.

That never got to her, however. She always had a smile on her face, and she could always be counted on to look at the bright side of things.

In mid 2020, Krista had been having some

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stomach and pelvic pain. She went to a doctor and after tests, Krista was told she had Stage 4 kidney cancer. She was given six months to live and few options for treatment.

Cancer wasn't new for Krista's family. When she was a teenager, sister Amber was diagnosed with leukemia. The doctor gave Amber little chance of surviving.

While Amber went through chemotherapy, her mother was at her side. Krista, a freshman in high school, took care of her little sister. Krista watched as Amber became very ill, lost her hair and became very thin. Often, Krista wondered if her sister would beat this cancer. Day to day, it wasn't certain. But in the end, Amber lived.

It was because of that, beating a near-fatal cancer, that Amber and Krista hoped for another miracle – one that would save Krista's life.

In September, Krista moved to Arizona to be near her parents. She thought the sun would help her mental state knowing winters in Washington can be cold and gray.

Later that month, Krista and Luann made a trip to Mexico to Oasis of Hope, an alternative cancer treatment center that focuses on the whole person. Oasis of Hope's Contreras Alternative Cancer Treatment in Tijuana employs various therapeutic elements focused on killing cancer cells directly and more efficiently while alleviating the toxic risk to healthy cells. Krista had hyperthermia treatments, Dendritic Cell therapy, high doses of vitamin drips and Ozone therapy. While other patients were getting treated, Krista would sing.

From Krista's Facebook page, Sept. 25, Tijuana (entry by Luann)

"Krista was feeling really good today after having her third and final dendritic vaccine, so we decided to enjoy the sunshine and have a short walk to Starbucks. Feeling somewhat normal. I'm so thankful to God for allowing us to have more good days than bad."

Afterwards, Krista began working with an oncologist at the University of Arizona in Tucson. The doctor told her that the cancer started as a very rare, mutated cell that accidentally grew in her body and had been creeping up for years. He ordered an MRI on Krista's spine and possibly surgery to remove the tumor and lessen the pain. In coming days, she learned that surgery was not possible because of the location of the tumor. It was too risky.

Krista continued to see her doctors. She began radiation treatments to address the pain. She was fatigued and the cancer was eating at the bones in her leg. The plan was that after the spine was healed, she would begin treatment of the tumors in her kidney.

She went on living life. She went with her family to church, where the elders prayed for her and anointed her head with oils. Her faith, which had been a part of her since she was a child, was often what carried her through the difficult times.

Facebook, Oct. 23:
"My mind is strong and my spirit is one of a warrior. Fighting this dragon every day and every night. I will continue to fight this together with God and my family and friends."

There was a trail nearby, and when she felt like it, she would take a walk down to the river. Days were spent in the sun or watching movies. Sometimes in the middle of the night when she was hungry, she'd get up and snack on Grape Nuts cereal with almond milk. She received the proceeds from a bake sale at her home church in Washington, where prayers were being said for her every day.

Her two best childhood friends came from San Diego and Denver for a visit.



Krista received alternative treatment for cancer at the Oasis in Mexico.

Who chooses Death with Dignity?

Washington's Death with Dignity Act allows adults in the state with six months or less to live to request lethal doses of medication from a physician.

A total of 267 people were dispensed the medication in 2018. (The most recent statistics available.)

- 158 physicians prescribed the medication; 61 pharmacists dispensed the medication.

The department received death certificates for 251 participants and After Death Reporting Forms for 238 people.

- 251 are known to have died; 203 died after ingesting the medication; 29 died without having ingested the medication; ingestion status is unknown for the remaining 19 participants. The department has not received documentation that indicates death for the other 16 people.

Out of the 203 who died after ingesting the medication:

- 86% were at home at the time of death; 92 percent were in hospice care when they ingested the medication.

Characteristics of participants (as indicated in death certificates, 251 participants):

- The youngest was age 28 and the oldest 98; 86% lived west of the Cascades; 96% were white; 44% were married at time of death; 70% had some college education; 75% had cancer; 10% had neuro-degenerative disease, including Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis (ALS); 15% had other illnesses, including heart and respiratory disease, and unknown illnesses;

94% had private, Medicare, Medicaid, other insurance, or a combination of health insurance.

Participants shared the following concerns with their health care providers:

- Loss of autonomy 85%; Loss of the ability to participate in activities that make life enjoyable 84%; and Loss of dignity 69%

What's the act say?

The Death with Dignity Act allows terminally ill adults seeking to end their life to request lethal doses of medication from medical and osteopathic physicians. These terminally ill patients must be Washington residents who have less than six months to live.

Who can request medication?

Only a qualified patient may make a written request for medication that they will self-administer to end their life.

How can a qualified patient make a written request?

The form provided by the Department of Health or one very similar must be used. The qualified patient must sign and date this form and at least two people must witness the signature. These witnesses must declare that to the best of their knowledge and belief the patient is competent, acting voluntarily and is not being coerced to sign the request.

What are the requirements for a witness?

One of the witnesses cannot be: "A relative of the qualified patient by blood, marriage, or adoption; A

person who would be entitled to any portion of the estate; or An owner, operator, or employee of a health care facility where the qualified patient is receiving medical treatment or is a resident." The patient's attending physician is not eligible. If the qualified patient is in a long-term care facility, one of the witnesses shall be a person designated by the facility and cannot violate any of the previous exclusions. This witness may be, but is not limited to, an ombudsman, chaplain, or social worker.

Who can write a prescription?

Only a doctor of medicine or osteopathy licensed to practice medicine in Washington.

Does a physician or pharmacist have to participate?

No, participation is entirely voluntary. Health care providers are not required to provide prescriptions or medications to qualified patients.

Does the patient have to make an oral request?

Yes, the patient must make an initial oral request, a written request, and then a second oral request after at least 15 days. When the patient makes the second oral request, the attending physician must offer an opportunity to rescind that request.

How long must a qualified patient wait?

At least 15 days between their first and second oral requests. The attending physician must wait at least 48 hours between the date the patient signs the written request and writing the prescription for medication.

Thanksgiving came and went. Krista spent the holiday in Arizona while most of the rest of the family traveled to Lu's home in Texas. But the reality of her cancer was always present.

Facebook, Nov. 11:

"I'm not one to complain, but I believe in the power of prayer. I wasn't able to make my last radiation treatment this morning because my muscles are all locked up. I couldn't move my leg. I will go tomorrow. Pain pill, cream, sleeping pill, melatonin, comfy bed, oil anointed prayer blankie, spa music, therapy dog. Thank you and God bless all of you during this crazy time."

December came and Krista and her family decorated for Christmas. They drove to see the lights at the Phoenix Botanical Garden. They did all the traditional holiday things except she couldn't stand long enough to make Christmas cookies. Her pain was worse and nothing seemed to help. "It's just so frustrating to not be able to do the things I want to do, like bake this holiday sea-



As a Realtor, Krista would play guitar and sing while showing houses.

son," she wrote to a friend. Krista was depressing, Amber said. Everyone did their part and tried hard not to think about what they

knew was a possibility – losing Krista for good. This might be her last Christmas, but no one wanted to say that out loud.

Hawaii. It was on her bucket list.

Facebook, Feb. 17:

"Made it to Honolulu airport on Sat., hung out in Waikiki, then went to Maui two days later! Here's some pics so far! So glad we got to go! About six months ago the Dr. gave me less than six months to live. I'm still here in paradise."

The Hawaii trip was something that her sisters tried to talk her out of going. They felt she didn't have the strength and that it would set her back. Amber went along to help Krista and said she knew there were moments Krista enjoyed. "But she also told us how hard it was to see people in the water having fun, and she couldn't even get her feet wet in the ocean," Amber wrote in her journal: They enjoyed the sun, good food and beautiful scenery. The trip was cut short when Krista's pain became so bad that all she wanted to do was go back to Arizona. The flight home was long and difficult for Krista to endure.

Facebook, Feb. 25:

"Well, I'm glad I got to see Hawaii! I had to come home early because of the pain in my spine. I can barely walk. I am getting a walker tomorrow for the house. This is just the spine not my other organs ..."

Krista had six lesions on her spine. There was scoliosis of the upper thoracic spine measuring 14 degrees from the superior endplate of T2 to the superior endplate of T8, compression fracture deformity at T11 with approximately 50% loss of vertebrate height.

Her friends sent Facebook messages to encourage her: "Praying for you my friend..."

"Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So, we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen, since what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal." - 2 Corinthians 4:16-18.

Throughout her illness, Krista relied heavily on her Christian faith. Not a week went by that she didn't post one of her favorite Bible verses on Facebook.

Facebook, Feb. 28:

"Trust and Wait for what is still unseen." - Romans 8:24.

By this time, Krista was continually medicated for the pain. She slept a lot. In moments when she felt better, she posted photos from her Hawaii trip to Facebook. When she felt like eating, she would ask sister Amber to make her chocolate chip cookies. She also would drink vanilla Ensure, apple juice, celery sticks with peanut butter, and peach and blueberry yogurt. Whatever she wanted, Amber would find it.

Facebook, March 11:

"I couldn't have asked for better sisters! So loving, kind, motherly, and selfless!! I couldn't imagine going through this awful disease without them! Amber Meyst-Gummere and Lu Monteleone-Grinnell! Gosh how I wish I had more time to spend with you!!!"

It was then that Krista began talking about death and having the choice to die. She just couldn't continue to fight a battle she couldn't win, Amber said. They began researching Death with Dignity in Washington state. Because there was nothing like that in Arizona, Krista decided to go back to Washington and move in with Amber, who made flight arrangements and contacted the state to find out more about Death with Dignity.

"The process wasn't easy. You had to have proof from a doctor that you only had six months to live," Amber said.

She needed two verbal requests from two doctors to get the go ahead. There was lots of paperwork, and interviews with Death with Dignity volunteers over the phone. Amber's job was to make the process go as smooth as possible.

Krista's family supported

For New Year's, Krista and sister Lu did what they loved to do. They got all dressed up, did their makeup and their hair and celebrated with a nice dinner out. That was something the pair shared throughout the years. They called it "getting pretty."

Lu posted on Krista's Facebook page: "We are so blessed to spend this time together, dress up, have some fun, make some more good memories, eat good food, laugh and cheers to the new year. Here's to 2021. May it bring healing and more years together."

In late January, Krista spent a couple of days in the hospital, recovering from 48 hours of vomiting, chills and fever. Doctors weren't sure what was happening. They thought possibly all the supplements she was taking were setting off her digestive system. Her most recent scans showed no more tumors and only a small growth in the existing ones. While all that sounded positive, Krista worried that her health would prevent her from taking her first trip to



Left: Sisters Krista and Amber are shown as kids. Right: Amber and Krista as adults.



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her decision. Her parents stood by her 100% and her friends, too. Once in Washington, Krista chose the first week in April. Amber found a lovely Air B&B. But every day Krista got worse. She could no longer walk to the bathroom; instead using a bedside commode. Krista told Amber there was no way she could make it to April. She wasn't even able to get to the car to go to the bed and breakfast. So, Krista decided to move the day up to March 27. She posted the plans on her Facebook page.

Facebook, March 15:
"I've chosen March 27 as the day I will leave this earth. I will drink something, fall asleep, and wake up in Heaven."

Krista told her friends that if they wanted to do something for her, they should send flowers so she could enjoy them in her final days. Thirty-seven bouquets arrived in the following two weeks. With what little energy she had, Krista thanked each person who sent flowers. Amber posted photos of each bouquet with Krista's messages. Amber strung the cards Krista received on a ribbon and hung them on a wall for her to look at.

A friend from childhood sent word that street art, a likeness of her face, had been placed on a wall in Seattle, about a block from Nord Alley in Pioneer Square. Krista told everyone to check it out. She also let her friends know that her precious dog Nautica was going to live with sister Lu in Texas where she would have dog siblings and places to go for walks.

Facebook, March 21:
"I'm so grateful Nautica is being spoiled and relaxing and doesn't have to worry about mommy anymore. She knew I was sick. She was scared and worried. Now she can be at peace and have fun!"

Amber took photos of Nautica and posted them

near Krista so she could always see her puppy, as Nautica had left for her new home. For the three sisters, the last days were special. They spent time sharing childhood memories, chocolate chip cookies, prayers and laughs. But the reality of Krista's pending death was ever present.

Facebook March 24:
"OK. Time is running fast! This Saturday the 27th in the morning is the day of my ascension. I am so grateful to be surrounded by all of the gorgeous flowers that most people don't get to see before their passing. Thank you everyone!"

There will be a virtual ceremony posted to this page after my passing that will be available for everyone to see and make comments. I love you all! I'm grateful for this life.

My advice is to not take friends and family for granted, do what you love, take care of your body, travel, love the Lord with all your heart, blessings abound in ways you would never know, accept Him into your life so you can go to heaven too and we can see each other again! Life is short!! This is not where we spend eternity, so choose wisely!"

All my love
Krista

Amber made the arrangements to get the drugs that would be needed. She ironed the silky pink nightgown Krista had picked out. Amber felt pressure to get things right, so the day would happen as Krista wanted. On Friday, Amber was filled with thoughts about things she did for Krista. "Did I do enough? Did I say all I needed to say and wanted to say?"

Facebook Friday, March 26 at 4:13 p.m.:
"I appreciate all the loving

and thoughtful messages. But my energy is low and it is time I focus on family in these final hours. Please understand that I will no longer be responding to Facebook or phone messages. I love you all and look forward to the time when we can be together again."

"My advice is to not take friends and family for granted, do what you love, take care of your body, travel, love the Lord with all your heart, blessings abound in ways you would never know, accept Him into your life so you can go to heaven too and we can see each other again!"

Krista Joy Murphy

husband. Lu helped Krista get into the nightgown. Lu and Amber helped her get back in bed and sit so she was as comfortable as possible. Krista spent time alone with the pastor. Then, the family came in one-by-one for private moments. Then they gathered together. Her uncle led them in prayer. There were songs and praises for the Lord.

Krista said she was nervous but had a peaceful heart. Then she wanted to start the process. Family members surrounded her. Soothing harp music played. The End of Life volunteer handed her the glass.

She drank it. Amber gave her some lemon sorbet to wash down the awful taste of the medicine. A few minutes passed.

Krista closed her eyes and fell into a deep sleep. Within hours, Krista passed.

Facebook, March 27, 3:35 p.m., posted by Amber:

"My Precious sister is gone. She passed with dignity and grace. I'm so blessed that she was with me in my home for the remainder of her life."

In the following days, Hospice came for the medical equipment Krista had used.

The room looked empty, and Amber tried to return it to how it was before Krista moved in. Her clothes had already been removed. She washed the fuzzy white robe that Krista had kept with her wherever she was. Amber knew in the next few days, she would get the items Krista had in storage: a stuffed monkey named Albert, her drawing pad from college and all the ceramics Krista had made.

Krista was cremated, as she wanted. Her ashes will be spread in several of her favorite places. A virtual memorial was held April 10. Friends gathered online to see photos of her life. Her pastor spoke of how Krista's faith carried her through her illness. The chat feature was open for anyone to share stories of their days with Krista. There was music. And there were tears.

Krista asked to be remembered as someone who loved life. She loved her friends and family. And she loved the Lord.

Facebook, March 30, posted by Amber:

"God shall wipe away the tears from their eyes. There shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying. There shall be no more pain for the former things have passed away." Then he who sat on the throne said "Behold, I make all things new." Revelation 21: 4-5

This is the verse I would read to Krista when she was in so much pain. Telling her, "Soon, very soon, you will be in Heaven and free from pain. Thank you, Lord, for your promises."

From Krista's Facebook Page, in September: an announcement of her Go Fund Me account that has since been closed:

"On August 26th 2020, Krista received the news that she has Stage 4 kidney cancer. The cancer has been defined as a rare mutation that is very aggressive and difficult to treat, initially she was given less than 6 months without any therapy, it has metastasized to her bones,



A friend of Krista's from childhood created a likeness of her on an art wall in downtown Seattle.

liver, lymph nodes, spine, chest, and adrenal. It has eaten parts of her right pelvic bone, making it difficult to walk and painful. Now she is having pain in the right pelvic bone and scheduled for an MRI. The radiation caused compression fractures in her hip and spine, she can stand in one place for no longer than 10 minutes.

While working with her current oncologist, Holistic Alternative treatments are crucial to hopefully help cure this otherwise considered terminal illness. She needs to hit this with everything she's got... Organic, plant-based diet, tumor killing supplements, hyperthermia sessions, ozone therapy, mega doses of Vitamins, acupuncture, CBD oil - to name a few.

These treatments insurance will not cover. These are out of pocket extra expenses that add up and are crucial to keep her immune system up to fight the cancer cells and extend Krista's lifespan and help with her pain.

We know we are in the middle of a pandemic, and not everyone can contribute monetary support. Even if you can't, please feel free to reach out and give her a few words of support.

If you know Krista personally, you know what a strong spirit she has and is a fighter, in her own words she says, "I believe God can heal me and I will fight this as hard as I can. He knows my limit."

Thank you for reading and for your support of any kind."



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Must have experience in one or more of the following areas: *Affordable housing - Construction or project management - Mortgage lending - Housing development - Economic development - Real estate - Architecture - Finance and Accounting - Grant administration - Project Management - Regulatory Compliance - Practical Experience with HUD regulations.*

For more information and a link to the application can be found at bainbridgewa.gov/1221. Positions are open until filled.

Questions? Contact Kirsten Jewell at kjewell@co.kitsap.wa.us