

She taught me how to be happy

When Sarah Turpin's baby daughter died, she was heartbroken. But, as she explains here, Laura's short life inspired Sarah to change her own

Photographs by **Claire Lloyd Davies**
As told to **Cheryl Galsworthy**



He was one of the most cheerful, lively babies you could ever hope to meet. When Laura was five weeks old, she smiled for the first time and never stopped. So, when she became a bit listless towards the end of Easter weekend in 2007, I started to worry. A couple of days later she began to vomit and my GP advised me to take her to A&E the following Thursday. My partner Robin stayed at home to look after my elder daughter, Emily.

By now, tiny pin-prick marks had begun to appear all over Laura's body and she was taken away for blood tests. As I went to collect her, a man in a white coat came towards me and said, 'I'm a blood consultant. I need to talk to you.' It was then that I

knew something was really wrong.

He sat me down and told me Laura had acute myeloid leukaemia. She was less than five months old. I could hardly take it in, but I was also desperate to get going with whatever treatment Laura needed. He explained the cancer was extremely rare in such a young child and that it was highly probable that it had developed when Laura was in my womb. Her condition was critical.

Laura had her first chemotherapy session the following morning. The next 24 hours felt interminable as she struggled to fight the cancer. That evening she was admitted to Intensive Care as a precaution.

On Sunday morning, we were called to Laura's bedside. She was not responding to treatment, and we were told there was nothing

more they could do. Laura was on a life support machine and doctors explained that it was our decision as to when it was turned off.

We didn't want to wait – Laura was gone and I just wanted her to be at peace, her body free of machines.

I kissed her goodbye and told her how much I loved her. Looking back, I can't remember how I continued to

function. I remember desperately wanting to get home to Emily, but then not being able to go inside the house. I sat in the car and watched people getting on with their lives, wanting to ask them how they could be so normal.

On 26 April, 11 days after Laura died, Robin and I attended her cremation together. Along with ▶

“We don't plan like we used to – it's too scary a prospect”



Keeping memories alive: Sarah with Emily (left) and her darling Laura (below)



the hospital chaplain, we were the only people there. We couldn't have put our friends and family through that experience.

Over the next few days Emily asked lots of questions. I tried to be honest while still reassuring her that Laura was at peace in heaven. Then one morning Emily announced that she wanted to have a party for Laura as a way of celebrating her life.

On 2 May we had a party near our home in Sheffield. A lady called Sylvia made the most beautiful cake with little replicas of Laura's favourite toys – a bear, a hippo and a lamb. I wore jeans as that's how Laura saw me every day during our short time together. I was determined to make a speech – as Laura was so young, many people hadn't yet met her, so I wanted to tell them about her.

I spoke of how Laura's arrival meant so much to our family. In the past I'd suffered from crippling bouts of depression and I believed she was sent to be my final cure. She gave Emily the gorgeous baby sister she'd always wanted and had shown Robin what a wonderful father he could be.

I'd met Robin at work when Emily was two, after separating from her father. We both worked as project managers so were great planners,

and in September 2005 we sat in a cafe and planned our newest project together – affectionately known as 'Project Baby'. Two months later Laura was conceived.

I spent the whole pregnancy convinced that this baby would be the most difficult in the world and worried that my depression would resurface. Robin fretted about being a good father. How wrong can two people be? My time with Laura was like having the holiday of a lifetime while staying at home. We didn't need to go somewhere exotic – we went to 'our' little Italian cafe or played in the park. And Robin took to fatherhood immediately: he worshipped Laura. I only wished I could have taped the one-sided conversations he'd have with her through the baby monitor – the very thought of them still reduces me to tears. It's the little things like that that have been the hardest. Like when, two weeks after Laura died, we had a power cut. I had to empty the freezer and throw away the little pots of puréed vegetables that I'd

prepared for weaning her. It broke my heart.

I knew that if I was ever going to rebuild my life I would need a project. For as long as I could remember I'd wanted to be a florist – I adore the smell and colour of fresh flowers. But I'd never

done anything about it and I never would have if it hadn't been for Laura. I had a very successful career in senior management and would never have 'risked' changing direction. But that's how death affects you: you realise that life is precious, so you get on and do the things you want to do.

I signed up for weekly flower arranging classes and it was the best therapy imaginable. It gave me a reason to get out of bed – I had to be up early to buy flowers from the local market. I experimented with arrangements

at home for Laura's room and at the crematorium. Once the course had finished, my new business had already come into being. I called it flowersforlaura.com and decided to donate 10% of my profits to Pact, a charity that supports the families of children receiving treatment at the cancer ward at Sheffield Children's Hospital.

Today, business is booming, and I swear Laura's little hands are helping whenever I'm making up a bouquet. People often comment that my flowers last longer than any others and I'm sure that has something to do with Laura working her magic.

The business has been such a lifeline, as has Robin. I couldn't have asked for more love or support, even though he has been through dark times, too. For him to have his baby – and his new role as a proud dad – snatched away from him has affected him profoundly. There have been times when it's been tough, but our relationship is stronger than ever – it's so important for us to continue being Laura's parents together rather than apart. We also share the huge responsibility of helping Emily grow up healthy, happy and unburdened by grief.

But we don't plan like we used to – it's too scary a prospect. I've come to believe I can only really control what time I get out of bed and whether I clean my teeth or not – everything else just happens.

My memories of Laura do a great deal to sustain me – they're with me every day through my flowers, and keep her alive in my mind. Some days, when I'm really busy, I look up to the skies and say, 'Oh poppet, you really didn't want Mummy to sit and mope did you?' I do have moments when I've sat and sobbed, but then I pick myself up for Laura's sake. I feel I owe it to her to find something to be glad about. Her life was precious and it deserves to have something positive come from it, so that is what I must do.'

● Visit flowersforlaura.com. 

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