

Named Scholarship

Pius X High School ~ Pius X Foundation



Sally Hakel Memorial Scholarship



With faith, everything is possible, but not always easy.

Sally Lynn Hakel was born on September 2, 1958, at the Wakefield Community Hospital to Duane and Doris (née Fischer) Bokemper. Until she was ten, she lived on a family farm near Wakefield, Nebraska, with her parents and her two older siblings, Rich and Sue. The three children, who were all one year apart, spent hours playing together. One of their favorite pastimes was pretending they had a house back in a nearby tree grove, where they drew lines in the dirt with a stick to designate the various rooms. They even furnished their home with an old bucket to use as the “bathroom.” As a young girl, Sally also liked playing paper dolls and making mud pies with Sue, as well as riding her bike with her two siblings up and down the gravel road adjacent to their farm. As a 4-H member, she enjoyed showing sheep at the Dixon County Fair.

It was during these formative years that Sally learned the importance of serving and caring for other people, a valuable lesson that resulted in a lifetime of service to others. Each year for Memorial Day, Sally would accompany her family to the Wakefield Cemetery to place flags on the graves of fallen veterans. At the age of four, she became an official dues-paying member of the American Legion Auxiliary and continued to pay dues throughout her life. She and Sue always joked about the fact that the two of them would eventually become the oldest members of the auxiliary who had not attended a single meeting since 1968, when the family moved to Lincoln, Nebraska, where their father had accepted a job with the American Legion.

Sally completed her fifth- and sixth-grade years at Calvert Elementary and then attended Pound Junior High and Southeast High School, where she excelled in academics as well as in sports. She was a top gymnast, who could do backflips anywhere; a guard on the first women’s basketball team at Southeast;

an accomplished softball player, who played right field for the Lincoln Swingers, a fast pitch, select team; and a track star, who still, along with her sister and two other teammates, holds the 440-yard relay race record. After graduating from Southeast in 1976, Sally attended the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, where she earned a bachelor's degree in science educational development.

It was during Sally's seventh-grade year at Pound that she met Judy Christensen, Sherla Post, Lorri Savidge, and Janis Masin. The five teenage girls soon became inseparable. Together, they walked to school, rode their bikes to the swimming pool, roller skated, spent hours on a trampoline, and after turning sixteen, cruised O Street. Many nights they spent at one another's homes, having "crazy, fun" slumber parties. Over the years, through college, marriages, babies, and especially after Sally's cancer diagnosis, they remained close. The four of them all agree that the "sisterhood will remain strong and that Sally will be remembered with smiles and laughter. Her presence will always be felt, and the fifth chair will always be at the table." This "fifth chair," with her genuine nature, her magnetic personality, and her big heart, continued to form lasting relationships throughout her life.

Anyone who knew Sally knew there were no relationships more important than those with her husband and two children. Sally first met her husband, Jim Hakel, in November 1984 at his cousin's wedding dance in David City, Nebraska. She was there with her boyfriend, but that fact didn't deter Jim from asking her to dance. During their dance, Jim told Sally how beautiful she was, and he still vividly remembers her face lighting up "with that big beautiful smile," as she thanked him. Several years later, Sally saw Jim pitching at a softball game in Weston, Nebraska, his hometown. Even though Sally was once again there with her boyfriend, who played on the opposing team, it didn't deter her from asking her friend Lynne, Jim's sister, who the pitcher for Weston was. Not long after, the two of them began dating. Jim believes "that he and Sal were just destined to be together."

During their courtship, Jim and Sally spent hours talking and getting to know each other. It didn't take long for Jim to understand that Sally knew who she was, what she wanted out of life, and what was important to her. Two areas were of extreme importance. The first was her faith, and she was looking for a lifelong partner who shared her strong belief in God. As a young girl, Sally had been raised in the Lutheran Church and always believed in God. But it was only after her first cancer diagnosis, her doctor found a cancerous tumor at the base of her brain when she was nineteen, that she came to believe "one hundred percent." Her faith was so important to her that before they were married, Sally joined the Catholic Church so that she and Jim could worship together as a family. Over the years, Sally's faith strengthened Jim's. Now, every night, Jim asks Sally to continue strengthening his faith so that he is as well-armed to face the end of life as she was.

As a young cancer patient, Sally had come to believe that "with faith everything is possible, but not always easy." And that faith was tested numerous times during her life. In the fall of 1993, she miscarried their first child; she was devastated. In 2002, Sally was diagnosed with a nonmalignant tumor on her pituitary gland; a year later, Jim was diagnosed with prostate cancer. In 2000, Sally lost her father-in-law, and in 2011, she lost her beloved father from mesothelioma. Finally, only eight months before she was diagnosed with lung cancer, she lost her mother-in-law. Sally's faith never wavered, but grew stronger through each trial, through each loss. It was as though God was slowly preparing her for her own final battle with cancer. "Cancer didn't beat her," Father Kenneth Wehrs declared during his funeral homily for Sally, "because the sicker she got, the stronger and deeper her faith grew."

The second important area—definitely not a negotiable one for Sally—was her desire for children. As Sally and Jim began thinking about marriage, Jim, who was seven years older than she, expressed his

doubts about having children at his age. It didn't take Sally long, however, to change his mind. She matter-of-factly told him that "if there are no children in your future, there certainly is no Sally either." And so with children as part of their future plans, they were married on May 8, 1993—five days after Jim's forty-second birthday—in a large Czech wedding at St. John Nepomucene Church in Weston, where his parents and all four of his sisters had also been married. And in 1994, on October 24, Jim's maternal grandmother's birthday, their daughter, Desirae, was born; one look at Desirae and the thought of not having children became instantly unfathomable to him. Two-and-a-half years later, on April 4, 1997, their son, Nolan, was born.

Anyone who knew Sally knew what an exceptional mother she was. Like all exceptional mothers, there was nothing more important to her than the well-being of her two children. Their needs and wants always came first, regardless of how tired or how sick she was. "Outside her work," her sister writes, "her world revolved around Desirae's and Nolan's school, church, and sporting events." Desirae recalls how her mom made every effort to come to her games, even when she was extremely sick. From the time her children began playing selective ball at age eight, Sally spent countless hours on the road, in motel rooms, in many ball parks and many cities throughout the United States, ensuring that Desirae could play softball, and Nolan, baseball.

Like all exceptional mothers, Sally also spent many hours planning birthday parties and holiday events, as well as buying the "perfect" gifts for her children. Desirae writes, "Mom planned the best birthday parties, gave the best gifts at Christmas, but it was never about the material gifts. She showed us and gave us so much more than that. They weren't the best birthday parties because all my friends said they were, they were the best birthday parties because she put her whole heart and soul into planning them to make me happy. They weren't the best Christmas gifts because they cost so much money, but because Mom listened to Nolan and me for months in advance about what we wanted and then bought those exact gifts."

One of Desirae's favorite activities with her mom was Christmas shopping. Each year the two of them would schedule a day for lunch and then shopping. In December 2007, shortly after the mass shootings at Von Maur in Omaha, the two of them were shopping at Gateway. While in Dillard's, Desirae shared her fears about being in the mall. Sally told her that she and Nolan never had to worry, that she would die before letting anything happen to either of them. "Desirae," she said, "you can't be afraid of living, and you can't be afraid of dying." These words meant more to Sally than just words used to comfort her young daughter, they were part of Sally's philosophy of life. She cherished life and lived each day to its fullest, with gusto—undaunted and unafraid.

Undoubtedly, the greatest testimonial to Sally's selfless love for and devotion to her children comes from her son, Nolan. In his junior year at Pius X High School, Nolan's literature teacher, Ms. Julia Schonewise, assigned her students an essay. Nolan decided to write about his mother's cancer diagnosis and her months of chemotherapy. He entitled his essay, "Why Must My Mother Suffer from Cancer?" Nolan's answer to the question was twofold: his relationship "with God had suddenly grown stronger than ever" and his family "had grown so much closer since the day of my mom's diagnosis." In the last paragraph, Nolan writes, "She's still the happiest woman I know and is back to the way she was, with a little less hair, of course. But my mom will always be the #1 woman in my life."

Besides being an exceptional mother, Sally was also an exceptional employee. She was one of those rare, fortunate people who loved her work. Her entire career was centered on serving and assisting the people of Nebraska—the ill, the elderly, and the disabled. After graduating from UN-L, Sally first worked at Madonna Rehabilitation Hospital in Lincoln as a social service worker and then as an

activities director for Holmes Lake Manor. In 1992, she was hired as a disability claims adjudicator for the Disability Determinations Section (DDS) for the state of Nebraska. She went through an eight-week training period under the tutelage of Roberta Riley Kirkendall, who then in 1993 became Sally's intermediate supervisor and remained so until Sally retired in 2014.

When asked to describe her working relationship with Sally, Roberta poignantly writes, "Upon meeting Sally, I was struck by her impressive intelligence, can-do attitude, beautiful smile, and sense of humor. In a short time, I realized she was one of the hardest workers I had ever met. Sally was an ideal employee. She worked with Nebraska residents from all walks of life, who reported being unable to work because of one or more disabling conditions that frequently included mental illness. Most were in dire straits. Sally treated all her claimants in her caseload—usually over one hundred—with dignity and respect, and never once in all the years did I receive a report from an individual that he/she had not been treated well by Sally. She was quickly promoted to the highest level of adjudicator and was the person I selected to be acting supervisor in my absence. Sally was not only an outstanding employee, but she was my personal friend, and I loved her."

Because of Sally's strong work ethic and her knowledge of the program, she mentored many new staff members during her twenty-two years at the DDS. She, too, became the chairwoman and go-to person for many special group projects within the agency and received several national awards for her leadership on these projects. In 1997, Sally received the Regional Commissioner's Team Award from the Social Security Administration for her "outstanding achievement and service to the Disability Program in the state of Nebraska."

Two years later, in 1999, the Nebraska DDS earned a national award for its outstanding record of completing disability cases with a high level of accuracy, with excellent case processing, and at a low cost. Sally received a letter from Douglas Willman, the DDS administrator for Nebraska, acknowledging her role: "The high level of achievement would not have been possible without your contributions." Later, she was honored at a luncheon. Finally in 2004, Sally received yet another award; this time she was awarded the Regional (a four-state area) Commissioner's Team Award for her leadership of the Nebraska Litigation Re-Adjudication Team. Although Sally was proud of her awards, she never displayed her trophy or plaques in her office for long; instead, she carted them home and packed them in a box in her storage room.

During the first week of September 2013, six days after Sally's fifty-fifth birthday on September 2, she was diagnosed with stage four lung cancer. It had already metastasized to her liver, her heart, and her spine. Her prognosis wasn't good; the doctors gave her anywhere from nine months to three years to live. Within a week, Sally had her first chemotherapy treatment, and for the next sixteen months, she received chemo once a month. These treatments made her so sick that she would spend a week in bed recuperating, not even able to watch television for the first couple of days.

Over the months, the chemo ravished Sally's body. She experienced difficulty in thinking and focusing, fatigue and chronic weakness—causing problems with her balance and coordination—excessive head and stomach pain, nausea and vomiting, seizures, double vision, deafness in her left ear, and weight and hair loss. But all of this pain, suffering, sickness, and loss, never diminished her spirit—her fortitude, her quiet resolve—or her rock-solid determination to attend Nolan's graduation in May 2015. And attend she did. What's more, as sick and as weak as Sally was, she planned and organized one of those memorable celebrations that she had become known for, even preparing much of the food for a hundred-plus guests.

Six months after Nolan's graduation, on December 5, Sally learned that the cancer had metastasized to the membranes and fluid around her brain and spine. Doctors inserted a portal under her skull, and in addition to her monthly treatment, she began receiving chemo once a week directly into her cerebrospinal fluid. On Christmas Day, Sally attended the Bokempers' celebration; she was so weak, Jim and other family members helped her to and from her mother's home. After several hours, Sally returned home, exhausted. She never made it to the Hakels' celebration that year.

On February 22, 2016, Sally decided to forgo chemo and entered in-home hospice. On the days Jim went to work, family and friends stayed with Sally. Krysti Michl, a friend and colleague of Sally's for twenty years, rearranged her work schedule to care for Sally on Wednesdays. Kristi describes those days with her: "She never once complained about her treatment or the symptoms she was experiencing. She fought hard to endure any symptoms she had and to make life for her children as normal as possible. Even when she knew the end of her life on earth was near, she didn't think about herself, but how her departure would impact her family. Her last few weeks on earth were spent preparing her family for life on earth without her. It was never about her, but her care and concern for others."

On Sunday, April 10, Sally received Holy Communion. The following Wednesday she told Krysti that after receiving Communion that day, she experienced an overwhelming sense of peace, saw a bright light, and described what she believed was the pathway to Heaven. Although at a loss for the exact words to describe her experience, she said the pathway resembled the Yellow Brick Road, the special road that led to the Emerald City, where the great Wizard of Oz lived. Eight days later, Sally's pain and suffering came to an end. On Monday, April 18, at 7:14 in the morning, with Jim, Desirae, and Nolan beside her on the bed, expressing their love and assuring her that the three of them would take good care of one another, Sally opened her eyes for one last look at Jim, squeezed his hand, and passed away.

The truth of the biblical teaching that one reaps what one sows has never been more clearly demonstrated than during the two and a half years Sally fought for her life. Her lifelong care and concern for other people were returned in kind. When Sally was diagnosed with cancer on September 8, 2013, her co-workers, throughout all units of the DDS and the Department of Education, donated hours of their vacation leave, many a week or more. Because of this donated time, Sally continued being employed/paid for months after she was unable to go to work.

Throughout her two-and-a-half-year battle with cancer, family, as well as friends, neighbors, colleagues, people who only casually knew her, and even people who didn't personally know her, but who had heard about Sally and her diagnosis, showered the family with love and support. These people came to be known as Sally's Army and wore bracelets identifying them as such. Sally's Army held prayer vigils, prayed the rosary, and organized prayer chains on her behalf. Her army delivered meals, cleaned the house, drove Sally to doctor's appointments and chemotherapy treatments, and even took care of Sally's bulldog, Hercules, when she could no longer care for him. And they attended her rosary and her funeral en masse—over eight hundred people came to celebrate the life of the beautiful woman they had come to know and love. And this love for and support of Sally's family continues today. Indeed, Sally did reap what she had sewed throughout her all too short life on earth.

In the end, Sally Lynn Bokemper Hakel, armed with her unwavering faith, died as she had lived, with love, dignity, and courage—undaunted and unafraid.