



My Favorite Christmas Memory

By *Nikki Stone*

Growing up, I never thought that anything could top reindeer hooves on the roof, Santa Claus popping down the chimney, and an enormous mountain of colorfully wrapped presents under the Christmas tree. And to be completely honest, I don't know if many Christmases since have provoked that same kind of emotion... until this past Christmas.

My Holiday plans were set. I was heading off on my first trip to Tanzania, Africa to work with a charity called Right To Play that uses sport and play to encourage healthy child development and builds safer & stronger communities. I would return home to a Celebrity Ski Event that hosts a variety of Hollywood Celebrities and Olympic Medalists. And finally, I would enjoy some time off from Speaking and Grad School by hitting the waist-deep powered slopes of Utah.

Well with one phone call, the skiing plans all came to a crashing halt and the greatly anticipated trip to Africa seemed unlikely. On the other end of the line my mother was telling me that she had been diagnosed with very aggressive breast cancer. Cancer? That was something that happened to other families. Not mine! Once I finally came to terms with the reality, I knew there was no question that I would travel back to my parents home outside Boston to support my mom with the surgery to remove her malignant lump and the start to chemotherapy. I figured that I could basically write off any kind of Christmas joy this year.

Through the surgery, we found that the cancer had spread to my mother's lymph nodes. I had decided not to travel to Africa so I could stay and assist my mother in her recovery, but my mother wouldn't hear of it. She encouraged me to go and help the children that were in greater need and come back and share my experiences of hope. I questioned whether my spirits would affect the contributions I could make and whether my attitude would allow me to return with any feelings of optimism. Once there, I was filled with inspiration as I saw how the power of sport brought the children new expectations and dreams. These children who had a life expectancy of a mere 45 years old were finding ways to enjoy what little they had and were living each day to the fullest. Despite worries for my mother's impending chemo treatments, I couldn't help but leave each day with a smile. When I returned home, I found that my mother was ignited with the same zest for life. Sometimes life's greatest adversities can shake us hard enough to realize and value what we have right now.

Two weeks later, I awoke in the same childhood bedroom that spawned dreams of winning an Olympic Gold Medal some day. But on this Christmas morning I wasn't thinking about my accomplishments or what presents would be waiting for me under the Christmas tree. My eyes were suddenly opened to what Christmas truly meant. The joy I felt that Christmas day surmounted the elation of finding a shiny red bike next to the tree, barreling down a ski slope with powder splashing in my face, or having a gold medal draped around my neck. The experience with my mother and the children of Africa changed my attitude and appreciation, not only for Christmas days, but for every 364 days in between. Nothing could compare to the gift of spending time with my family and, ultimately, the gift of life. Since that Christmas day, I too have caught the spirit, and now close every e-mail and letter with my favorite quote: *"Life is not measured by the number of breaths we take, but by the moments that take our breath away"*.