

My Friend Died Tragically From Alzheimer's, but God Made Something Good Happen

Alzheimer's is a horrible disease. For the first time in my life, I saw it take the life of a close friend—Susie Plakon, wife of my good friend Scott Plakon. She was only 57.

I've been best friends with Scott and Susie since the early 1990s. We watched our children grow up together. Scott and I were in a men's group for more than 10 years, and we went to the Soviet Union for two weeks in the early 1990s. We shared ups and downs in business, and I helped him campaign (and win) when he ran for state legislator in 2008. Scott has been there for me when I went through difficulties. Now I'm trying to walk with him through this painful trial of losing his beloved wife to a dreadful disease.

Susie's death was widely reported, even nationally—including on —not only because of the high profile her husband has in Florida politics but also because of how she brought awareness to Alzheimer's.

Because of my friendship with the Plakons, I was one of the first to know around 2013 that something was wrong with Susie. She underwent all sorts of medical tests to find out why she was losing her memory, hoping it was not Alzheimer's. Then in 2014, their worst fear was realized—Susie Plakon—one of the most wonderful Christians I've ever known, was diagnosed with early onset Alzheimer's at age 53.

At first, I was sworn to secrecy. The Plakons didn't want anyone to know she had Alzheimer's. Then about a year into their ordeal, they decided that since "all things work together for good to those who love God" (Rom. 8:28), they would share her story widely, knowing it would help others. I

know most readers never knew Susie. But maybe her story can motivate you to believe that God can make something good out of your worst problems and that you can minister to others when you are weakest or even when you are absent your body.

What has happened since Susie's diagnosis has been truly amazing. Even as Susie's health deteriorated, she accompanied Scott to Tallahassee when the legislature was in session. Scott began promoting legislation to help Alzheimer's patients. It resulted in House Bill 883 being passed, which increased the number of memory disorder centers in Florida, the most recent displaying a plaque in Susie's honor at Florida Hospital in Orlando. The hospital began a program to identify Alzheimer's and dementia patients with a wristband in hospitals because the care they need is different from other patients', and this immediately identifies them to hospital personnel. Scott hopes this catches on nationally.

Scott has become a strong advocate of finding a cure for Alzheimer's, one of the few diseases that is 100 percent terminal. As a result, the Alzheimer's Association recently invited him to be the keynote speaker at its national leadership convention in January.

Susie had accompanied Scott to Tallahassee long before doctors diagnosed her disease, and as people got to know her, they came to love her. Then as more people learned of her battle with Alzheimer's, Susie became a bit of a celebrity among lawmakers. Quite a few statewide-elected officials attended her funeral on Sunday. And U.S. Sen. Marco Rubio, Gov. Rick Scott and several other state cabinet members wrote kind letters of condolences and made phone calls to Scott. The governor had Scott presented with a state flag that had flown over the capitol. Clearly, Susie's death did not go unnoticed, and she won't be forgotten. At the memorial service, the Alzheimer's Foundation presented a recently created award called the Susie Plakon Lifetime Achievement Award.

Hundreds of people attended her funeral. It was a beautiful tribute to a wonderful lady who loved Jesus, loved music and loved her family and friends. Most of her six children are musically gifted, and their performance at her memorial service was truly touching. They showed a video of Susie singing one of her own compositions about being a mother. It was good to see her as she was before this disease ravished her brain and body and took her life.

Scott wrote on Facebook just after Susie died on July 23 that she “went to be with the One that she loved even more than life itself ... Jesus. She is now with Him forevermore, experiencing beauty, joy, love and peace that our minds cannot even begin to comprehend.”

While her story and courage facing this disease has had a profound impact on the Alzheimer's awareness movement in Florida and beyond, there's another very touching way she has impacted thousands. Two years ago, she was in Tallahassee, sitting in the hallway outside her husband's office with her head back and worshipping the Lord, totally uninhibited by those around her. Her sister recorded a video of the sweet moment on her cellphone. A few days before Susie died, Scott put that video on Facebook because of the genuine worship it portrayed. Within 24 hours, 22,000 people had watched it. The last I checked, the number is now up to more than 60,000 views. It's only a minute long. I encourage you to watch it here and then share it. Let's keep it going viral.

Think for a moment of the impact Susie Plakon's life and death have had. While she was lying at death's door, the video of her worship was impacting as many people as would fill a major football stadium. Legislation was passed as a result of her ordeal with Alzheimer's. Thousands of patients will receive treatment in the memory center that displays a plaque in her honor. And on Saturday, Gov. Rick Scott appointed Scott Plakon to the state's Alzheimer's Disease Advisory Committee, where Scott can help fight to end the disease and serve as an

advocate for those affected by it. As much as I'll miss my close friend Susie, I'm amazed at how God made all things work together for good.

Scott has invited friends to donate to the Alzheimer's Association in Susie's honor, and more than \$15,000 has already come in. Many of you may have loved ones who have been affected by this horrible disease. Even if you didn't know Susie, maybe you'll remember that this is a worthy cause and will click here to give as I have. And be encouraged that when bad things happen—even death—that the Lord keeps His Word, and all things do work together for good.