

Kassandra's story

It's been a tough two years since Kassandra Bolton found out she had diabetes. She and her family have endured the shock of her diagnosis, three major operations and the Christchurch earthquakes. But Kassandra, nine, has come through it all smiling. Now she wants to become a diabetes doctor. Mum **Tracey Bolton** tells her story.

Hello everyone, my name is Tracey Bolton. I have three children Nethaniel, 12, Kassandra, nine, and Leyam, four. My daughter Kassandra was diagnosed with Type 1 diabetes in 2009.

We were on a camping trip and I noticed Kassandra was going to the toilet a lot, drinking more than usual and wetting the bed. I said to my husband Riki that we might have to take her to get tested for diabetes when we get home but didn't really think much more of it. As Riki's sister and his best friend had diabetes, we knew a little about diabetes.

When we got home Kassandra started vomiting and had severe stomach pains. I phoned my GP the following morning as I was getting worried. Later that day when we arrived at the doctor's surgery I noticed Kassandra had an ammonia smell on her breath and her breathing was very shallow. By this stage I knew that Kassandra had more than just a tummy bug.

I explained Kassandra's symptoms to the doctor and straight away she said she wanted to check her blood sugars. I was thinking to myself she could not have diabetes. The nurse checked her blood sugars – they were 20. I am a volunteer for St John Ambulance and senior caregiver for Kate Sheppard Hospital and I knew it was too high. My mind was spinning. The doctor looked at me and said 'I am so sorry Tracey'. I asked my doctor to take Kassandra out of the room and I broke down. I didn't want Kassandra to see me so upset.

I phoned my husband and told him what was happening. He was blown away. I asked him to meet me at home so we could rush her up to the hospital. As I was driving home, I just couldn't hold the tears back. Then a little voice said to me: 'Don't cry mummy, I will be ok'.

A lovely nurse greeted us when we arrived at Christchurch Hospital. Kassandra's observations were done and she had lots of blood tests. She had a drip with IV fluids and insulin infusion. During that night she had to have four-hourly blood tests and hourly blood sugar testing. I hated seeing Kassandra go through all of this, I just wished I could take her place.

Although Kassandra was having all these tests, during the night each time she woke, she had a smile that brought a tear to my eye.

By the morning Kassandra's blood sugars had stabilised and we met a few doctors from the diabetes team. Then we met Neil Owens [diabetes nurse specialist] and he



“Diabetes will not stop this girl doing anything. We couldn't be any more proud of her.” – Tracey

took us under his wing. Over the next three days Neil taught us all about diabetes. He told us the importance of blood sugar testing; how to draw up and inject insulin; how to treat Kassandra when her levels are low. I guess at this stage things were beginning to hit home.

I kept asking myself why? We had to accept that it was just bad luck. We were in hospital for four nights. Being discharged from hospital was just like taking home a newborn baby.

When Kassandra started back at school, it was very hard to let her go. Trudy Brown from the diabetes team went to her school to teach the teachers all about diabetes. It felt like she had started school for the first time. We found it very hard when Kassandra got bullied by the kids in her class because of her diabetes but I guess that was just one of the hurdles we had to get over.

My family and Riki's family have been very supportive. My mum quite often picks up Kassandra for the weekend to give us a break. It also gives me a chance to give the boys treats we don't normally have when Kassandra is around. We still let Kassandra eat lollies, chocolate and ice blocks but in moderation. We have to remember that she still is a kid.

A lot of people say to me: 'How do you cope having a child with diabetes?' I say that sometimes it can be hard, especially when she is sick, but now we just get on with it. It is just part of our life.

Last year I decided to join the diabetes youth committee and have met some amazing people and made lots of new friends. We also attended a diabetes youth conference last August and learnt so much more about diabetes.

Then Cassandra underwent a big kidney operation. Unfortunately Neil was away sick the day of her operation and the rest of that week but we just managed to make it though the week without him. We had most of the diabetes team come to visit. I was overwhelmed really with all the support we had.

We had just got over the whole kidney operation when Cassandra started to develop really bad abdominal pain. Our doctor suspected Cassandra was brewing appendicitis. I couldn't believe it, we had had our fair share of bad luck this year.

Would you believe, a month after Cassandra's appendix was removed, she started complaining of a severe toothache. I just could not believe it. What more could go wrong with my wee princess? They decided that they would have to put her under general anaesthetic to take out three teeth. Everything went well, thank goodness.

One day I noticed Cassandra was looking very sad. She is always a very happy girl who loves spending time with extended family and friends. Now all Cassandra was doing was sleeping and not really wanting to leave us. She could not make it through the day at school without crying. The psychologist said Cassandra was traumatised by what she has been through and we had to give her more attention at home and keep her safe. Cassandra spent the next few weeks being very sad. But then she slowly started to enjoy her life again.

Today Cassandra lives a normal life. Diabetes will not stop this girl from doing anything. She really is an amazing little girl. We just couldn't be any more proud of her than we are.

Whenever I have a down day about the whole idea of my beautiful darling daughter having diabetes, I always think to myself there are kids and parents out there worse off than us. I just pray that one day there will be a cure for diabetes.

Kassandra's dream is to become a diabetes doctor and I am sure she will succeed in this. In fact she made a comment to Neil a few months back: 'I will be your boss one day'.

We live in Bexley and our house was damaged in the Christchurch earthquake. We are still living at home but we think we will lose it. We were thinking of packing up and leaving town but the support we have here is amazing.

It's been a long couple of years but things can only get better now. We could not have got through all of this without the support from so many people, especially our GP Phillipa Ryan, Neil Owens, Sally Sowman and Christine Murray and Diabetes Youth Canterbury. But most of all we want to thank our friends and family for all their support and love. ●



Top: The Bolton family: Leyam, Tracey, Cassandra, Riki, Nethaniel.
Centre: Cassandra following her kidney operation.
Bottom: Best friends: Tracey and Cassandra.