

## A Bond like No Other

Like most longtime friends, Nadine Freedline and Dionne Terrell love to reminisce. They laugh, cry, and finish each other's sentences. Their lives have so many parallels that it became a running gag among their friends, until four years ago, when one after the other Nadine and Dionne experienced every mother's worst nightmare. In six weeks' time, both women's infant daughters died after going down for a nap.

They met in 1993 when both were students at Southwest Missouri State University. A brunette with olive skin and an Italian temperament, Dionne was a senior. Blonde-haired, blue eyed Nadine was a sophomore. After graduation, both began careers working with adolescents - Dionne as a deputy juvenile officer for a family court and Nadine as a high school teacher.

The similarities continue. The women married within two years of one another; Nadine to fellow teacher Mike



Freedline in 1998, and Dionne to mortgage broker Kevin Terrell in 2000. Soon after, both were pregnant with their first child. The women turned to one another for support. "None of our other friends were pregnant," says Nadine. "So we ran everything by one another." After Nadine learned she was having a boy, the friends were delighted

to learn that Dionne was also having a boy. Nadine gave birth to her son Drew in March 2001, and Dionne had Cooper three months later.

Having babies the same age brought the two young families closer. They spent hours together, as their sons grew. Moving near one another in St. Charles, Missouri, both used the same pediatrician. They even had the same type dog - Golden Retrievers. "It was a joke between us that whatever Nadine did, I would follow," says Dionne.

In 2004, Nadine and Mike learned they were expecting another child. No one was surprised when Dionne and Kevin soon learned they were expecting, too. When Nadine learned that she was having a girl, both women were thrilled. "I knew then that I was having a girl, too," Dionne says. Six weeks later, Dionne's hunch was confirmed: She was also having a girl.

Nadine and Mike were thrilled when baby Sydney Nicole was born in April 2004, as were Dionne and Kevin, who greeting

baby Lola Marie six weeks later, in June 2004. It was an incredibly happy time.



### Sydney

"I was intensely connected to my daughter," Nadine recalls. Sydney was undemanding: She slept well, ate well, and had a sunny disposition. "I was just infatuated with her from the moment I saw her," Nadine continues. "I called her 'my angel.'" In photos, Sydney was always a smiling blonde cherub.

In August, Nadine went back to work. The Freedlines added dropping baby Sydney off with Drew's babysitter to their morning routine. The babysitter was well known to the family. "I met her through church," Nadine recalls. "She was the first person I interviewed when I was pregnant with Drew that I immediately adored. Drew adored her...she loved him as if he were one of her own. I knew she would love Sydney the same way."

As she drove away from work on the afternoon of August 16, 2004, Nadine was excited to see her baby girl. Busily preparing for the new school year, she had barely had time to think about anything else that day. Nadine turned the corner to a sight no parent wants to behold: the street in front of the sitter's home was filled with emergency vehicles. Nadine was quickly surrounded by police, who had already brought Mike to the scene. Nadine was told that Sydney had gone down for her afternoon nap and when the sitter checked her 20 minutes later, she had stopped breathing. She was gone. The stunned parents were not permitted into the house until the medical examiner arrived - in agony, they waited for over an hour.

Nadine's first thought was that it had to be a mistake. But when Nadine and Mike were finally able to be with their baby and hold her, Nadine could no longer deny the truth. "I'll never forget it," she says, her voice trembling. "She was not the Sydney that I had dropped off that morning." Just one week shy of four months old, Sydney Freedline had succumbed to Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS).

The next hours, days, and weeks passed in a blur, as the Freedlines tried to come to grips with their loss. Nadine recalls, "I cried a lot. Our friends and family made sure we were never alone." She tried to stay busy; in any quiet moment all she could do was dwell on what had been lost.

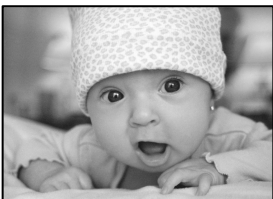
### Dionne's Reaction

Learning of Sydney's death, Dionne was devastated. She wondered how to be supportive without hurting Nadine. "Things would never be the same. Lola would always be a painful reminder of what they'd lost," Dionne says. "We grieved for Sydney...our hearts broke for them, but we grieved for our friendship, too." The first night, Kevin composed a poem called "A Family of Four," which he read at Sydney's funeral as a eulogy for the little girl.

Dionne wondered if she should stay away. "I didn't know what to do," she says. "I couldn't sleep. I thought about it constantly." Finally she called her friend. "I told her that I knew she must be going through hell," Dionne recalls, tears running down her face at the memory. Nadine tears up, and says, "I remember that conversation. I opened up to her. I have a lot of friends, but I remember Dionne so vividly through it all."

Dionne and Kevin also struggled with their own fears – if Nadine's baby could succumb to SIDS, couldn't it also happen to Lola? They took extra precautions, even using an infant sleeping wedge to keep Lola safe in her crib. Everyone repeatedly assured the new parents that Lola would be fine. *After all, lightning doesn't strike twice...*

### Lola



Dionne laughs when asked to describe Lola's personality. "I have easy babies. Lola was very laid back. She never cried," she says. Known for her fashion sense, Dionne adored shopping for her

daughter. She had a closetful of unique clothes for "Little Miss Fancy Pants," as she called Lola. Dionne spent hours photographing her kids, and she enjoyed dressing up Lola to take her picture.

Dionne returned to work in October. Like the Freedlines, Dionne and Kevin left Lola with their usual babysitter. "We trusted her absolutely," Dionne says of woman who had become a friend over the years. "She was actively involved with the children, and very detailed in what she would tell you each day. We discussed Sydney's death and like us, she was very aware." Many of Dionne's co-workers knew, as well. The death of Sydney and its aftermath were frequently discussed at the office.

However, Sydney's death was the furthest thing from Dionne's mind on October 6, 2004. Late that morning, she answered her office phone and was told by a Sheriff's Deputy that her baby was being rushed to the hospital by ambulance. Time stood still. "I kept asking if she was breathing, but he wouldn't tell me," Dionne recalls. "I must have asked him fifty different ways, but he just kept saying the same thing." In shock, Dionne called Kevin en route so he could meet her. At the hospital, Dionne and Kevin learned that Lola's sitter had put her down for a nap, and a short time later discovered that she was not breathing. "Kevin told me later that he knew she was gone when he heard that, but I was in denial," Dionne recalls. "I don't know what I thought was wrong with her, but I never dreamt that she wouldn't go home with us."

For over an hour, emergency staff attempted to resuscitate Lola, to no avail. Only six weeks after the death of Sydney Freedline, Lola Terrell too had gone down for a nap and had never woken up. Like their friends, the Terrells were permitted to see their baby after she died. "I remember thinking as we were holding her that 'this is so wrong,'" Dionne says tearfully. "I couldn't believe this was happening to us."

The medical examiner later determined that Lola had suffocated against the infant wedge, the very device that was advertised as a SIDS prevention tool. At the time of her death, Lola was eleven days shy of four months old.

### Nadine's Reaction

It had never occurred to Nadine that anything would happen to Lola. "It was a very awkward moment. I felt guilty," she says of hearing the news. "We always joked about me doing things, and Dionne following. My gut reaction was to feel responsible in some way." The longstanding joke that had brought the couples so much laughter was no longer funny. Nadine continues, "I thought, 'I'm the last one she's going to want to see.'"

Nadine's fears were unfounded. "I wanted her there," Dionne says emphatically. The two friends held each other, sobbing. It was unbelievable. "I relived it," Nadine recalls. "We were just six weeks out. I started all over with my grief." The women's friendship was solidified yet again, this time through tragedy.

As he eulogized Lola at the same church at which he had honored Sydney, Kevin again read the moving poem he had written for Sydney. He only had to change two words to reflect that now it was for his own family of four.

## Coping

Having shared so much already, Nadine and Dionne now struggled to cope with their losses. Nadine immediately threw herself into work, and at home, she and Mike still had Drew to think about. He was a constant reminder that life would continue. "Mike and I became obsessed with Drew," Nadine says. "He was the only thing that made us smile and feel happy. I think he had more attention and love than any three year-old on the planet." Dionne, however, did not return to work for several weeks. Friends and family surrounded her constantly. Dionne heartily agrees with Nadine's assertion that her three year-old kept her going. "Without Cooper, there wouldn't have been any reason to get out of bed," she says.

Like many, Dionne and Nadine had made memory books for each of their children. Nadine had kept Sydney's book up to date, and after her death added photos and a final written entry to honor her angel from heaven. Nadine found the process therapeutic, and has encouraged her friend to do the same. Dionne, however, is unable to finish Lola's book. "It's so final. It's too much pressure," she says.

Both families held a balloon release to mark their daughters' first birthdays; in April 2005 the Freedlines invited family and friends as they released dozens of pink balloons for Sydney, and two months later Dionne and Kevin Terrell did the same, releasing 111 balloons to signify each day of Lola's life. Both mothers surrounded themselves with keepsakes, including photos, memory chests, jewelry, and quilts made of their baby girls' clothing. All family photos now include an angel or another symbol to represent each girl.

## Building Awareness

Nadine and Mike wanted to keep Sydney's memory alive, but had not given it much thought as they made funeral arrangements for their baby. "We were literally in the parking lot [of the mortuary] when we got a call that Sydney's life insurance policy did not cover infants under six months," Nadine recalls. "We were faced with an enormous debt to give our baby a funeral." Nadine and Mike did not want other parents to be faced with that situation, and at that moment, the Smiling Angel Foundation was born.

The Foundation's purpose is to help parents pay for their children's funerals. "At the worst moment of their lives, it's one less thing to worry about," says Nadine. To date, the Smiling Angel Foundation has assisted numerous families. "It feels good, that we can do something for her," Nadine says,

her words emphasizing that the effort is about Sydney. The Freedlines also host a golf tournament each year near Sydney's birthday to celebrate her memory and raise funds.

After Lola died, Dionne and Kevin were determined to raise public awareness about SIDS. "No one should go through what we did," Dionne says. "It was *preventable*;"- due to the presence of the wedge. Following once again in their friends' footsteps, the Terrells set up a foundation called Lola's IDEA (Infant Death Education and Awareness).

As its name suggests, the goal of Lola's IDEA is to educate the public about infant death. The Terrells hold a number of fundraisers, but the Foundation's golf tournament, held each year in June, is Dionne's favorite. She plans it down to the smallest detail. "That's Lola's birthday party," she says, referring to her baby's June birthday. "It's my chance to celebrate her." Additionally, Kevin and Dionne give presentations and meet with bereaved parents. In October 2008 they spoke at a regional SIDS conference in Kansas City, Missouri.

The couples wanted to use foundation funds to educate new parents. Dionne explains, "We wanted to mass-produce a short video that parents would view after having a baby, educating them about SIDS." Their idea came to fruition when Cody Wade, a former student of Nadine's now a graduate film student, offered to produce the video.



Filming took place in early 2008; extremely powerful, the 6-minute video includes interviews with the couples, their pediatrician, a death examiner, and a spokesperson from SIDS Resources, Inc.

## Safe Sleep Video

It's Memorial Day, 2008. The Freedlines and Terrells host a party to premiere the *Safe Sleep* video. Family members and friends enjoy barbecue and beer as the sounds of playing children fill the air. After the meal, the two sets of parents face the crowd; the video is introduced. Dionne is crying, rocking slowly from side to side. One has the sense that she is symbolically rocking her lost baby girl, holding her close. Dionne says she enjoys the speaking engagements because they give her a chance to talk about Lola. But the rocking suggests it is at a cost.

There is not a dry eye in the room as the video ends; applause breaks out. The four bereaved parents are quiet, but smiling. There are no first step videos, no recitals, no graduations, no weddings. This video is all they have, and this is their moment to shine.

### What Next?

The women have continued on their parallel paths. After Sydney's death, Nadine and Mike wanted a third child. Dionne and Kevin struggled with the same decision. "My family was torn apart," Nadine says. "I knew I had to have another baby as soon as possible." The women discussed the idea at length. Was it the right thing to do? Could they endure another pregnancy? Would they lose another baby to SIDS? Dionne laughingly says that once Nadine decided, she knew what she was going to do, too. Nadine became pregnant immediately, and Dionne soon after. Both women say they intended to have girls – not to replace their lost babies, but to complete their broken families.

When Nadine learned she was carrying a boy, she was initially upset. "I cried," she recalls, looking at her friend. "Dionne cried with me." Dionne says, "She called me on the way back from her ultrasound, crying so hard she couldn't talk. I just started crying; I knew then I was having a boy, too." Three weeks later, ultrasound confirmed that Dionne was indeed having a boy.

As the women shared a third pregnancy, they were shell-shocked and afraid. On July 21, 2005 Nadine gave birth to Trey, so named to signify that he was the Freedlines' *third* child. Seven weeks later on September 8, 2005, Dionne gave birth to Canton. Both families took extra measures to ensure that their babies would sleep safely, including keeping them on apnea monitors, and strapping them in car seats rather than prone in their cribs. "I think I aged ten years in the first six months," Nadine says. Dionne felt the same way. "I didn't sleep well until Canton was a year old," she says. Nadine took a six-month leave of absence after Trey's birth, and as always, Dionne followed suit.

The friends cannot imagine life without these boys, and both say they are a gift. "I know now that I couldn't have handled another girl so soon," Nadine says. Dionne agrees, adding that although she would give anything to not have lost Lola, she also wouldn't trade Canton for anything in the world.

### BFF's Forever

Each of the women is asked what the other means to her, after all this time. "Well, Dionne and I have a connection like

no other," Nadine says thoughtfully. "No one knows exactly how we felt, and how we still feel. It is an empty, sharp pain that is constantly with us. I don't know that it will ever go away, only fade and we both know this." Dionne agrees. "I can't imagine going through this without Nadine! She gets me! She validates all my bizarre thoughts," she says, laughing. "I don't think I would be as healthy now if I didn't have Nadine."

The friends have shared tears, laughter, even temper tantrums. "You become very possessive of your memories, your feelings," says Dionne. "No one else could understand why I would suddenly be furious at someone who was just trying to help. But I could call Nadine, and she was doing the



exact same thing. She could understand things that my family or even my lifelong friends could not." Nadine adds, "I would take Lola's death away from Dionne in a second if I could. But I will admit that she has been my saving grace over the last four years and having her by my side has helped me tremendously. We will have a bond for life!" Dionne's voice becomes tremulous and her eyes fill with tears. She says, "It's hard to explain, because words aren't enough. You can't do it justice. We have a connection that no one else has."

The women make it clear that the loss of their daughters has not defined their lives, or their long friendship. "Four years later Dionne and I are with each other a lot," Nadine explains. "It's not like all we talk about is the girls. We have so much more in common than just this. It is just them that have bonded us together."

- Stacie F. Bunning, Psy.D.

View the *Safe Sleep* Video:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ErPcyNeF8E4>

Contribute to the Freedline's Foundation:

**Smiling Angel Foundation**  
**1107 Landing Place Drive**  
**Lake St. Louis, MO 63376**

Contribute to the Terrell's Foundation:

**Lola's IDEA**  
**627 Timber Creek Trail**  
**O'Fallon, MO 63368**