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Jill Kelly writes book about son Hunter

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Staff writer

Jill Kelly was convinced her marriage to Jim Kelly — former Buffalo Bills quarterback — would end in divorce after their medically fragile son, Hunter, died in 2005 at age 8½.

In a new memoir out Thursday, she writes that the couple's relationship had been strained for years: "Hunter had been the glue that kept our family together." At 4 months old, Hunter was diagnosed with a rare genetic disorder called Krabbe's (kra BAYZ) disease that degenerates the nervous system. He wasn't expected to live past the age of 2.

The newlywed parents coped with the devastating disease in very different ways. Jill oversaw, and provided much of the 24-hour care Hunter required. Jim, who retired from the Bills just before Hunter was born, traveled often as a TV football commentator. The Kellys established and worked on Hunter's Hope Foundation, yet as a couple they grew far apart, feeling disconnected, misunderstood and unable to talk effectively with each other.

After losing their son, the Kellys sought marriage counseling from their pastor. One session in 2007 launched a dramatic turnaround. With teary eyes, Jim told Jill he had been unfaithful for a long time and that he didn't want to hurt her anymore. Her mother, Jacque Waggoner, had confronted him about "still living an immoral lifestyle" and told him one of them must tell Jill. Waggoner — who, like Jill, is a Christian — urged Jim to humble himself before God and "let Him free you."

Jim hadn't shared his wife's devout faith. But the crisis led him to talk with his brother and pastors for help. He thought about how he wanted his daughters to respect him. He wanted to play football with Hunter in heaven someday. He prayed to Jesus for forgiveness, and he said something changed. He felt free.

He told all of this to Jill, who'd become a Christian in 1998. He asked for her forgiveness.

And Jill forgave him. The feelings of betrayal and hurt didn't disappear immediately, but she believed he was sincere. The steps each of them took transformed their lives and their marriage.

"Jim and I are completely different people," Jill said in an interview last week at their home in Orchard Park, Erie County, where the two sat together on a well-pillowed couch that was tough on Jim's painful back. "We've been given a second chance."

They believe God worked through their son to keep them together and to show them what really matters. The book title, *Without a Word: How a Boy's Unspoken Love Changed Everything* (FaithWorks, \$23.99), comes from the fact that because of his disease, Hunter was never able to speak, let alone

control his movements or even swallow.

The book chronicles how the couple met in 1991, the birth of their first daughter, their large wedding, and on to 2008, when the couple renewed their marriage vows. Some passages are in Jim's words.

Jill includes struggles she had with her faith. She describes the overwhelming depression she suffered — and finally sought treatment for — after Hunter died. She believes that while she hoped a miracle would heal Hunter, she wound up with the miracle of her marriage and family being healed.

"If I did not have my faith to go on, we would not be sitting here," Jill says. "We would not have a story."

Jim said what keeps him on track is waking up each day and seeing his daughters — Erin, 15, and Camryn, 11 — and his wife, as well as the different way he feels inside. "I wish I would have known it a long time ago," he said.

Jim still travels as an ambassador for the Bills and to lobby for newborn testing for all diseases that can be treated if caught early.

He avoids putting himself in situations where he can be compromised. Jill says friends have commented that Jim is calmer and has a peace about him.

"I'm a work in progress when it comes to our faith," says Jim. "I'm miles behind her, but I'm trying to catch up. She's in a full sprint and I'm jogging."

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Additional Facts

Book signings

Jill and Jim Kelly are scheduled to appear:

- 7 p.m. Sept. 16 at Borders Books & Music, 1000 Hylan Drive, Henrietta.
 - 6:30 p.m. Oct. 14 at Alpha & Omega Bookstore, 1601 Penfield Road, Penfield.
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