



**Genome readers honor genetic counselors
who interpret complexity with compassion.**

Made possible by



L TO R:
BRAD, MELISSA



Melissa Gilstrap

A Familiar Voice

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In January 2012, I was diagnosed with two bilateral tumors in my neck, called carotid body tumors. After sharing this news with my family, my sister noted she had always felt lumps in her neck and wondered if she could have the same tumors. As it turned out, she did. At this point, it seemed obvious that there was a genetic component.

After the diagnosis, I was put in touch with Melissa Gilstrap, a genetic counselor in Denver. I had no idea what to expect, as this was obviously an incredibly scary time, but I'll never forget the first appointment. Melissa was so knowledgeable and well versed on my rare condition. She quickly put me at ease and explained how we would progress with testing.

Once the results came in for my condition (SDHD mutation), Melissa very patiently and professionally answered all of my questions in order to help me understand the way this mutation is passed on and diagrammed the family tree so we could track how it was inherited. The realization that came from this knowledge was, by far, the most difficult to digest as she explained how our two boys each had a 50-50 chance of inheriting the gene from me.

At the following appointment, we brought our boys in so they

also could talk with Melissa and ask any questions they might have. They were ages 16 and 9 at the time. She was so impressive at explaining this incredibly difficult condition and process in a way that they could understand. When the time came to have their cheeks swabbed for the test, her gentle guidance helped ease the fear of what lay ahead. She then proceeded to explain how the results would take several weeks to come back. I shared with her that we were leaving town for a family vacation — we wanted to get away from the craziness for a couple of weeks before I was to have surgery.

After looking at the calendar, Melissa said that most likely the results would come in while we were in Florida. Given that each of our kids had a 50-50 chance of getting this terrible mutation, I knew that we had only a 25 percent chance that they would both test negative, so I was expecting the worst.

I made a request to Melissa very clearly: “If the results come in while we are on vacation, please don’t call me to let me know. Let us enjoy our vacation, and we will deal with the results when we return.” She said she would wait.

But that’s not how it played out. I will never forget this moment. We were staying in a condo in the Florida Keys, trying to enjoy our

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vacation. I did my best to stay off-line but checked my phone every once in a while for work. I noticed a voice mail, so I stepped outside to listen to it. A familiar voice came through that said (and I am paraphrasing), “Hi, Brad, it’s Melissa Gilstrap. I know you asked me not to contact you while you are on vacation, but I just got the report back from the lab, and I know you’re going to want to hear the results. Please call me back as soon as you can.”

I was instantly in tears, and my hands were visibly shaking with the dread of what I was about to hear. I called her back immediately. She picked up and gave me the best news I’ve ever received: both of our boys tested negative! I immediately went back inside to share the news. My boys had never really seen me cry before, but these were tears of absolute joy and relief as I relayed the incredible news to my wife and kids. The four of us all hugged. It was a memory that we will never forget. The mutation stopped with me!

Thank you, Melissa. You were so kind, compassionate, professional, and respectful to me and my family. I can’t thank you enough for walking alongside and supporting us through one of the most difficult times of our lives. 🧡