

# Family Matters: Becoming an Adult While Managing Invisible Illness

*Liz and Matt Dolan's Story*

*By Sarah Morgan*

Liz Dolan is a 25-year-old who adores her Instagram-famous Chihuahua, Tucker; sometimes chafes at living at home with her parents; and looks the picture of health and fashion in her smiling portraits.

Liz is a vibrant, engaging young adult that her father Matt describes as being, “thick as thieves with her sister and brother.”

But the complicating factor is that Liz has cystic fibrosis.

Matt describes himself as both dad and “annoying roommate” to his youngest child. He’s had a ringside seat to watch and support Liz as she has entered adulthood but missed out on out on some growth experiences (CF has made it impossible for her to work or finish her degree studies) while simultaneously dealing with situations far more serious than most of her peers have had to deal with.

Both Liz and Matt bounce effortlessly between lighthearted and matter-of-fact in discussing what it’s like to face CF – an approach you sense is key to



*Liz Dolan with her Instagram-famous Chihuahua, Tucker, out to eat.*

how the whole family approaches Liz’s disease and life in general.

Little Tucker is probably the only Chihuahua to have his own Oktoberfest hat, which Matt’s sheepishly proud of bringing home (“Who have I become?”). But the tiny dog also has a big job. He’s a companion animal who has made a key difference in Liz’s life; her routine has to revolve around a demanding schedule of treatments, without which she cannot function. At minimum, they take half an hour, three times a day. Travel, while enjoyable, requires extensive preparation and

contingencies. “I have to be pretty regimented and diligent,” Liz says.

The Dolan family grew up with CF as a constant reality. Matt notes that it wasn’t until he and wife Anne were empty-nesters that the family-wide impact of CF became clear. When Liz had to be admitted to the hospital in Kansas, her siblings’ immediate responses from New York and California were, “We’ll be right there.” “It struck me,” Matt says, “to see how they responded as adults.” They’d had the normal sibling rivalry growing up, in addition to concern for their little sister but, “They’re all very

connected. None of them gives an inch, but they're protective and loyal and have a good time. And they each have a relationship with each other that does not rely on us as their parents. As their father, that feels really good."

Matt, his wife Anne, and Liz moved to Palo Alto several years ago, and Liz is now a patient at the Stanford CF center, where her lung function has been able to stabilize. Earlier she'd become "bottoming out" with an infection that had been rapidly detrimental. "If we'd stayed in Wichita," Matt notes, "I don't know if she would have survived."

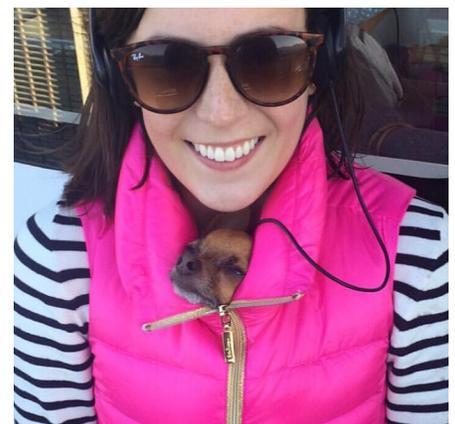
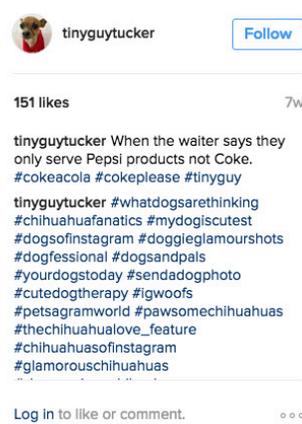
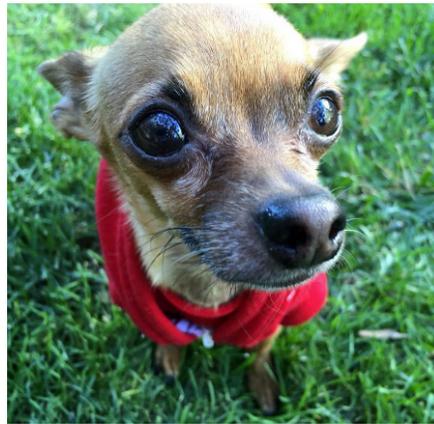
Liz is blunt: "I have a life-threatening disease that will eventually kill me. If I don't get a lung transplant, yeah, that's the reality I'm living with." But, she notes,

"My parents raised me to say, 'I'm Liz, and I happen to have CF.' I'm not a person with CF who happens to be named Liz."

"I was told, 'You can do anything you want. You might have to go about it a

different way, it might take you longer, but you can still achieve things.'" She's firm when she talks to well-meaning people who pity her: "I don't need you to feel bad for me. I have a great life despite the things I'm going through."

She hopes for cures, for research funding – and for far greater public awareness of invisible illness. "A lot of people have a hard time understanding when, from the outside, you don't look physically ill."



**> Kansas City**  
7045 College Blvd.  
Suite 300  
Overland Park, KS 66211  
p 913.317.9700

**> Chicago**  
205 N. Michigan Ave.  
Suite 3200  
Chicago, IL 60601  
p 312.540.6900

**> New York**  
469 7th Ave.  
10th Floor  
New York, NY 10018  
p 646.795.3600

**> London**  
6-8 Bonhill St.  
London  
EC2A 4BX  
p +44-20-32392129

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Contact Wendy Blackburn at 913.956.4328  
wendy.blackburn@intouchsol.com  
**intouchsol.com**