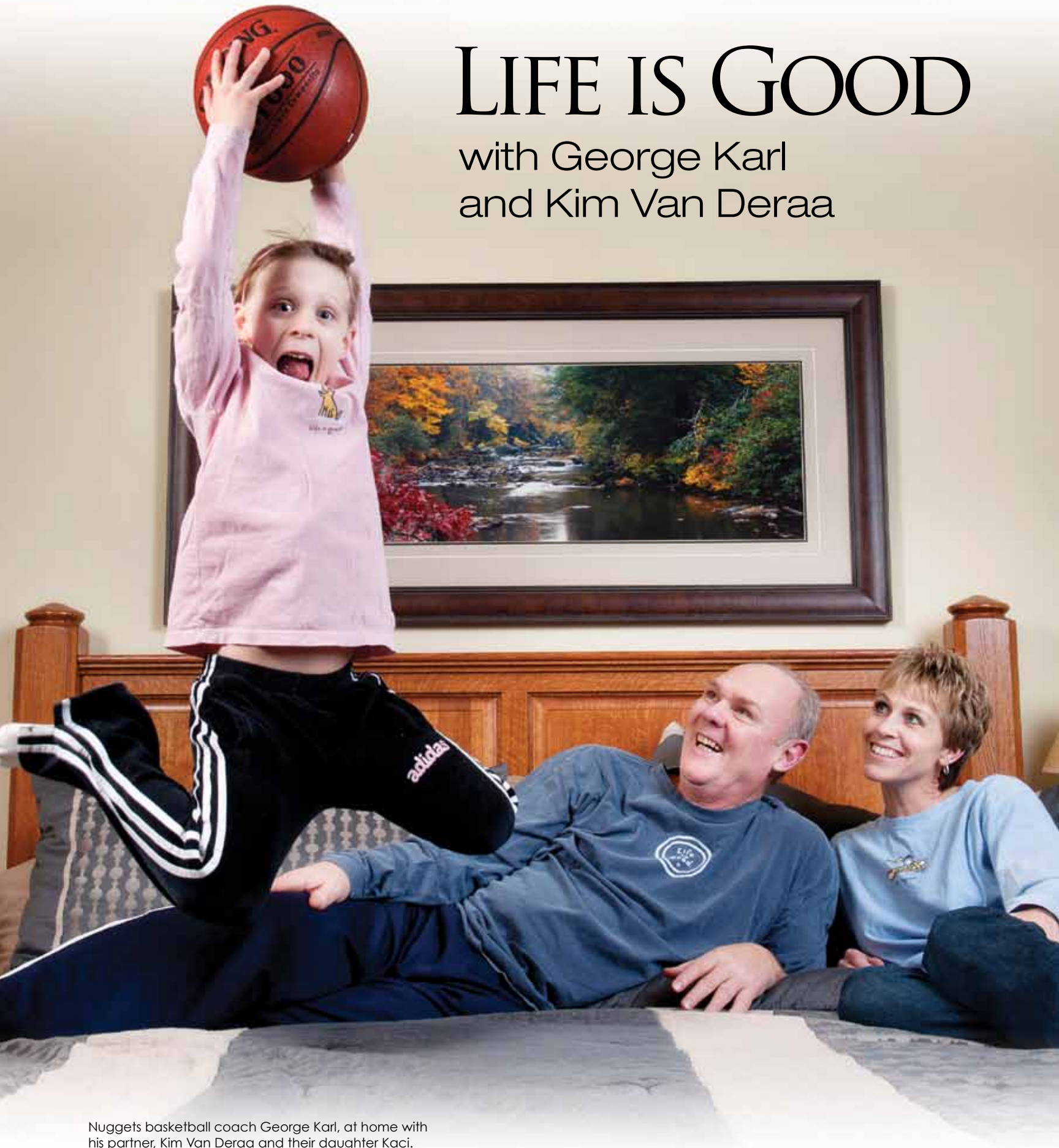



LIFE IS GOOD

with George Karl
and Kim Van Deraa



Nuggets basketball coach George Karl, at home with his partner, Kim Van Deraa and their daughter Kaci.



“Carmelo Anthony was a fantastic asset for the Nuggets. Everyone in the organization—from the coaching staff, players and management—tried to convince him to stay. But he wanted to make the change and we had to live with that. This wasn’t a bad thing; in the end, all hope is that the trade is a win for Denver and a win for Melo. Losing Chauncey is the sad part of the deal, the sad business of sports. I suspect that one day Chauncey will be back, maybe as part of the Nuggets organization again, we’ll have to see. In terms of the new players, we have four NBA starters. We need time to become familiar to one another and to grow as a team, but at the same time, our excitement and enthusiasm about the change has been first-class. With good players, good talent, and the right attitude, we’re bound to win.”

—George Karl

By Nancy Sharp

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He calls her his cancer angel. But before cancer, there were Kim and George. And there was basketball, always basketball.

They share a passion for the sport, a passion that drew them together. In the game of basketball, you can’t win without rebounding, and it’s the same in life: Success, however you measure it, involves rallying to challenges. Rebounding has made Denver Nuggets coach George Karl and Kim Van Deraa, his partner, a stronger team. They take life a day at a time but feel confident and grateful for their second chance.

George played guard in college for the University of North Carolina under the legendary Dean Smith, who still holds the record among men’s NCAA Division I basketball coaches with 879 wins. Smith’s quiet leadership style made a lifelong impression on George. “He was the most humble and successful man I ever knew,” he says.

Although George went on to play in the NBA for two years with the San Antonio Spurs, Smith’s influence inspired his coaching career. Before coming to Colorado in 2005 to coach the Nuggets, George had coached eight different teams, in the National Basketball Association, the Continental Basketball Association and Real Madrid in Spain. He had a family, a wife and two children (son Coby has played professional ball himself, including a short stint last year with the Nuggets), and regrets that he was not more present for them in the early years. George and his wife divorced in 1998 but remain friendly. Daughter Kelci, 31, now has two children, a toddler son and infant daughter.



Kim grew up in Kimberly, Wisconsin, among a family of basketball lovers. She remembers shooting hoops for hours each day in her driveway and then as a point guard in high school. Her love and talent for the game paid off with a full scholarship to the University of Wisconsin Parkside, where she played small forward for the Rangers.

George and Kim's story begins in 1998, his first year coaching the Milwaukee Bucks. He'd just left the Seattle SuperSonics after having led them to the postseason in all seven of his seasons there. Milwaukee offered him an attractive contract and the chance to rebuild a struggling team. "Right from the beginning, he was such an attention-seeker," laughs Kim, who was working in the back office in the player personnel and scouting department. "He used to hit a golf ball down the glass entryway just to get a rise out of the staff."

At first, her interaction with George was limited to human resources matters, yet she couldn't forget her enthusiasm for the game. "I always gave him my opinion," she says. "I'd tell him to rotate certain players more, and he was open to it." The coach was impressed by Kim's devotion to the sport and her courtside savvy. "She absolutely loves the game," he says. When his office assistant left a few years after he joined the Bucks, he offered her the job. "She really had my back."

Their relationship was wholly collegial for years. "But George, being George, started to clown around a lot with me the more familiar we grew with one another," she says. George confesses to giving her plenty of attention.

It wasn't until four years later, in what would turn out to be George's last year with the Bucks, that they allowed a deeper connection. "This was different than any relationship I'd known because it started as a friendship," he says. They kept their romance to themselves until the Bucks let him go in 2003. Kim worked with the team for the next year after George left, but their relationship continued. By the time they moved to Denver in 2005, they had a daughter, Kaci, who was six months old.

A wedding has never appealed to them. "Marriage in the legal sense isn't important to us," Kim says. "We feel married. What matters is that we have each other."

Kim, 46, never misses a home game. She sits in the same seat, number 12. "I like the routine," she says.

She dresses comfortably in jeans and a pastel fleece and focuses like a beam of light on the court. Her pretty blue eyes dart left and right, following each Nuggets player. She's on top of their every move. It's Jan. 9, a frigid, snowy night; the Nuggets are playing the New Orleans Hornets and I'm sitting with Kim. We're joined by her friend and boss, Cathy Hawk, who runs Clarity International, an executive coaching firm, with her husband, Gary. Kim provides administrative support for their business. Cathy has known George since his Seattle days; she coached him on and off for a year, and they've remained close friends. Also with us is Chuck Kisse, who assists George and Kim with a variety of personal and financial matters.

The Nuggets are having an off night. By now, the world knows that star forward Carmelo Anthony is eyeing a move to another team. He's especially preoccupied tonight, prompting Kim to yell, "He draws so much attention to himself. Pass the ball." Another top player is shooting inconsistently, which frustrates her. "He's only scored two points by the end of the second quarter. Get him out," she yells to George, who cannot hear her above the spirited cries of a crowd equally disappointed by the team's lackluster performance this evening.

Kim wants George to cycle in the players on the bench. "He should give these guys a chance." At some point, No. 6, Arron Afflalo comes in. "I like him," she says. "He's a hard worker."





Nuggets basketball coach George Karl gets a makeover from daughter Kaci at home.

“It drives George crazy when I do this,” she says, resigned to the fact that she can’t help jumping in with her opinion. He refers to her as his unpaid assistant coach. “It really isn’t fair to him because he gets criticized all the time; the last thing he needs is to hear it from me at home.”

The crowd boos and Kim sits deeper in her seat. She’s noticeably quiet, the disappointment evident in her face and body. “I just want the team to win. I just want George to win.”

George appears calm despite the hissing in the arena. Cathy leans in to say how he has benefited from her coaching to gain strength as a leader. “There’s a lot of humbleness in that,” she says.

“It’s true,” Kim adds. “He is the most positive person I know. For every negative comment I make, he asks that I say five positive things.”

The team loses to the Hornets 96 to 87.

The next week I sit with the couple in their kitchen over tea. Their daughter, Kaci, now a first grader at the Montessori School of Denver, plays contentedly in the open family room. I first met George and Kim last year when my twins enrolled at Montessori. The twins are two years older than Kaci, but this year she and my son, coincidentally named Casey, are in the same mixed-grade class. I had followed George's cancer story closely, but it wasn't until this past fall at a school birthday party that I had the chance to ask how he and Kim were handling the experience. Neither of them knew that my husband, Steve, and I had both lost our first spouses to cancer.

George was pleased when I asked if I could interview him and Kim together. "She deserves so much credit," he says. I understand, because I know that cancer affects the whole family. She had become his caregiver in a way neither of them expected. He feels indebted to her for carrying him, carrying all of them through this second bout with cancer, this time with squamous cell carcinoma of the head and neck that would put him through eight weeks of hellish treatment and an even longer recovery. There were unexpected hospitalizations, two blood clots in his leg and lungs, blistering rashes, mouth sores, cracked skin, shortness of breath and a feeding tube. In one of the worst moments, says George, "My daughter, I felt, thought I was a monster."

From the beginning, the diagnosis shocked him. "I'm a fat guy," he jokes, "so I really thought the lump on the side of my neck was fatty tissue." It had been five years since he had been diagnosed and successfully treated for prostate cancer, long enough for him to let go of the dread that had stifled him. Not even a year after his own prostate cancer, George's world had crashed again when his son, Coby, called to tell him he had thyroid cancer. Coby would undergo a second surgery in 2007 but remains healthy today.

"The family tree in America is touched by cancer every day," says George, "and we don't spend nearly enough time or money trying to defeat it." America, he says, has a guilt trip about cigarette smoking because we hid the fact that it was toxic for years. "Today, the biggest threats aren't cigarettes; it's nutrition and the environment."

Which brings us to today and the new, trim George Karl who, with Kim as his catalyst and muse, has redefined his approach to food. Research has long shown the anti-cancer benefits of an organic diet, but the couple's holistic education wouldn't begin until Parker-based nutritionist Richard Thomas spontaneously wrote George a letter advising him to change the way he eats.

"No more Mountain Dew and Honey Buns for breakfast," George quips. "Now I start the day with eggs and a smoothie of apple, beets, celery and carrots." Thomas insisted that he eat nutrient-dense, whole foods with lots of phytonutrients and antioxidants (read: colorful fruits and veggies). They have eliminated processed food altogether.

George looks terrific. He has more energy and his knees no longer hurt because he's 60 pounds lighter. The shift in diet represents a major lifestyle change. "I walk through a 7-Eleven and can't buy anything but bottled water." Occasionally he wants to cheat. "I'm only human," he reasons, extolling the virtues of Skippy peanut butter.

Kim clearly takes pride in George's well-being. She, too, is a convert to this new way of living. "People just don't realize that what we eat affects our immune system. What we put into our bodies can cause a real breakdown if we aren't mindful."

George and Kim also consulted with an immunologist who helped to figure out what went wrong in his body. "My cancer-fighting cells were asleep," George says. He and Kim are wholly reliant on the immunologist today to keep his toxins at bay. He does so with a healthy regimen of vitamins and supplements.

"I wish I knew at 20 what I know now," George says, somewhat philosophically, which isn't out of character. He was a philosophy major in college and still carries an affinity for both Aristotle and Deepak Chopra. Personally, he lives by the mantra that life is good. "Too many times we wake up feeling that life is a pain in the ass, wondering how we're going to fix it. But 90 percent of being a leader is how you approach it."

George and Kim choose to wear their attitudes: Together, they own some 30 pieces of Life Is Good memorabilia, including hats, T-shirts, sweatshirts, pajama bottoms, shorts and a vest.

It's just as easy to wake up and think life is good, George says. "In fact, it's our job to make it great." He is big on karma and happy now to have turned his around. I can't help but ask about the Nuggets' karma this season. Ever the coach, George applies the same principles. "This team obviously needs to make a change."

"It's rare that you see him stressed," says Kim, although their lives are anything but relaxing. The home phone and George's cell ring no fewer than 10 times in our short time together. When possible, he makes it a point to be home each weekday by four p.m. and to kiss Kaci goodnight. He is a devoted partner, father and grandfather, grateful to be among a handful of NBA coaches to have celebrated 1,000 wins and to be back in the game of life.

More milestones await. George turns 60 this May and has every intention of coaching throughout his next decade. In his off time not spent with family, he'll continue to advocate for kids through his foundation, Friends of Hoop. Cancer, however, remains his priority. "We ought to have a 10-year campaign to find cures," he insists. "In order for that to happen, we need to double the funds spent on cancer research; every dollar raised by cancer foundations should be matched." George is committed to doing what he can to see this happen.

Anything's possible with the right attitude and a strong partner by his side. ○

A DAY OF FOOD IN THE NEW LIFE OF GEORGE KARL

Breakfast Smoothie

(makes 16-20 oz. depending upon quantity of fruits and vegetables used)

- 1-2 apples
 - 2-4 carrots
 - 1 beet
 - 1-2 stalks celery
- Blend together all ingredients

Tomato/Basil Side Dish

- 12 roma tomatoes cut in small cubes
 - 1 C extra-virgin cold-pressed olive oil
 - 1/2 C balsamic vinegar
 - 1 tsp. Herbamare seasoning salt
 - 6-8 large leaves fresh basil
 - mozzarella cheese cut into small cubes
- Combine first 5 ingredients and top with mozzarella

Wild Salmon with Mango Sauce

- 1 mango peeled and cut in small pieces
- 1 onion, chopped in small pieces
- 1 red bell pepper, seeded and chopped
- 1-2 Tbs. capers
- 2 Tbs. salsa
- 1 Tbs. balsamic vinegar
- 1 lb. salmon

Bake salmon on top rack of 425 degree oven. Combine remaining ingredients and spread over salmon about two minutes before salmon is done.

Bok Choy

- 1 bunch baby bok choy, chopped
 - oregano seasoning to taste
 - 1/4 tsp. sea salt
 - garlic powder to taste
 - 2-3 Tbs. unrefined virgin coconut oil or avocado oil
- Heat olive oil in pan over medium heat and sauté all ingredients until soft.

Recipes by Richard Thomas, PhD, Holistic Nutrition.
For more information, e-mail holisticnutrition4u@yahoo.com
or call 612-221-8236
All recipes use organic ingredients.



A meal prepared for Nuggets coach George Karl and Kim Van Deraa by their nutritionists: pad thai with chicken, bok choy, and tomatoes and basil.