

# Happy Birthday to a Special Niece

By Terre Belt  
Bereaved Aunt  
Anne Arundel County, Maryland  
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Your birthday. Memories of so many of them flood my mind as I turn the calendar page to October. The games in the backyard. The cakes that reflected the latest favorite character of the year for little girls. The family celebrations. Your special 16<sup>th</sup> birthday. The stories of your 21<sup>st</sup> birthday.

So as the fall winds begin to blow, I think of your birthday and of you. I still celebrate the date of your birth, but the celebrations are a mix of tears and joy since your passing. It's just impossible not to think about what should have been.

I wonder over and over again about what you would have become, what you would be adding to society, now that you would be 25. You were absolutely brilliant – indeed, one of only 13 McNair scholars – and I just have to wonder what the world is going to miss out on without you in it.

I think about how your death changed the very fabric of life for so many of your friends. They mourn your loss deeply and they still honor and sustain your memory. It's amazing to me how they all describe you as their very best friend – you were so special to each of them. They say every day with you was an adventure.

I think of the gaping hole in our family. I know you wrote that trying times pull us all together, but I'm not sure you can imagine what it's like trying to overcome two tragedies. One empty seat at the family table was unbearable – I can't even describe what it's like with two empty seats.

And of course, on October 6, it always comes back to just remembering you and to longing for you. You were one of my life lines – lighting candles in Cortney's memory and sending birthday cards even after she was gone. You were the best big sister, and you were a daughter that most parents only dream of. You were a very special granddaughter, cousin and niece. You were ambitious and you were going places. You were so together. You were, as they sang at your memorial service...*More than words*. I hope you know all of that. I wish I had told you.

So as you can see, your birthday conjures up quite the wide array of feelings. I'm sure you understand – you always did.

Happy Birthday, Traci. I love you. I hope that Cortney sings for you and gives you a spiritual hug from all of us.