Braun: Father's battle with pancreatic cancer influences Fair Lawn teen to raise awareness for disease

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Bob Braun/Star-Ledger Columnist

FAIR LAWN — She and her older brother, Craig, sat across from their parents in the living room of their Fair Lawn home. They knew something was wrong, of course. Their father had not been well for weeks and the doctors were unsure why. But they didn’t expect this:

He had inoperable, stage four pancreatic cancer and his doctors said he would live just another six months.

"We cried," Nicolle Milstein says. "We said, ‘It’s not fair.’ We’re not bad people and we didn’t deserve this."

George Milstein lived for more than three years, virtually the entire high school career of his daughter and, during that time, father and daughter learned a lot about each other and about themselves. He was 58.

"He was never really an optimistic person," says Nicolle, 18, "but yet he was determined to fight this. My father would do whatever he needed to do to live as normally as he could."

He continued to work, making up days he lost to chemotherapy. He refused the idea of leaving the upstairs bedroom he shared with his wife, Andrea, even when walking became difficult. He did whatever he could to help ease the sadness, fear, and anger that comes with a diagnosis of terminal cancer.

"He fought the fight of his life with no intention of ever giving up."
Nicolle knew her father was doing that for his children. She wanted to do something in return. "I wanted to make my dad proud."

But how? She already was a straight-A student, a classical pianist who had won regional competitions, someone who volunteered to help children and senior citizens. "A perfectionist from the moment she started school," says Andrea. "She would get upset about a B-plus."

Nicolle says she would live her life in a way that would "honor" her father. She would not allow his illness to distract her from the hard work she always displayed in school. She might cry at night when she turned off her light but she would keep focused. "I couldn’t let him see I was becoming a different person because of what was happening to him," she says.

She worked even harder in school, eventually graduating — four months after her father’s death — with high honors, near the top of her class. She worked harder at the piano, winning statewide honors. Nicolle took the most difficult courses she could and found herself studying for three Advanced Placement (AP) tests while her family sat shiva for her father.

But she was becoming a different person. "I began to see what really mattered, what was important and what wasn't important. I heard students complain about the most pathetic things."

Nicolle also was determined to do whatever she could to help eradicate the disease that would kill her father. With the help of teachers at Fair Lawn High School, she initiated "Purple Day," now an annual event in November designed to make students aware of pancreatic cancer. Other teachers also helped her raise money to donate to the Pancreatic Cancer Action Network, a national group that supports research and provides assistance to families affected by the disease.

Nicolle changed in another way as well. She had thought most of her life she would become a teacher — Andrea works with handicapped children in a public school — but her father’s illness made her reconsider that, too.

"I thought of the people who tried to help us get through my father’s illness," she says. She was impressed
by local pharmacists who made sure her father got the medication he needed, even when insurance companies balked, prescriptions expired, and the manufacture of some medicines was discontinued.

"I’d be with my mother when she would go to the drug store and watch the people there got on the phone and insist that my father get everything he needed. I never thought of drug stores that way."

Nicolle was admitted to the University of the Sciences in Philadelphia where she planned to study pharmacy but, after her father’s death and his long fight with cancer, the family’s finances wouldn’t allow it. She will start at nearby Ramapo College in the fall and insists she will go on to pharmacy school eventually. She will bring her advocacy for eliminating the disease to the state college.

She will attend Ramapo with the help of a scholarship from the Ulman Cancer Fund for Young Adults. In an essay she wrote to win the grant, Nicolle explained she knows her father would be proud to know she wants to make a difference in the lives of other families stricken by cancer.

"I would do whatever it takes to know I have honored my dad."

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