

Daughter gone, but never forgotten

Heather Salerno, For the Journal News

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(Photo: Carucha L. Meuse/The Journal News)

Haverstraw's David Goldwasser used to call his only child, Marisa, a miracle baby. His wife, Sharon, finally got pregnant after several miscarriages, and when Marisa was born, she was six weeks premature. Despite their early worries, she grew up to be a varsity athlete and a stellar student, topped with a sunny disposition.

"She grew and thrived and turned out to be an extraordinary person," Goldwasser says.

But in 1999, at age 16, Marisa was told she had Hodgkin's lymphoma. The family never saw it coming: As Goldwasser puts it, her condition went from "a cough to a biopsy to a cancer diagnosis," seemingly overnight.

Marisa handled the news bravely. Knowing that she'd lose her hair to chemotherapy, she asked friends how she'd look with a "GI Jane" haircut – and promptly shaved her head.

She started a cancer support group at Clarkstown High School North, yet was so quiet about her own circumstances, some didn't even know she was ill. Even while undergoing treatment that left her exhausted and sick, she never once missed a test or a team practice.

"She never said, 'Why me?'" Goldwasser says.

Marisa seemed to get better after chemo, and by her senior year, things were looking up. Her hair was growing back, and she was accepted early admission to Duke University. But then the cancer returned, along with a bleak prognosis.

The second time around, treatment was more intense. Marisa endured high-dose chemo and radiation, followed by two stem cell transplants, in the hope of creating healthy bone marrow. But the regimen took a toll: She went deaf and lost one-third of her body weight. Meanwhile, Marisa's mother – a lifelong diabetic – passed away. Marisa died 18 months later, in 2003, when she was 20.

"She beat the cancer, but it was really the therapies that eventually took her life," Goldwasser says. "It just became too much for her body to bear."

After Marisa's funeral, loved ones wondered how they might honor her. So Goldwasser set up the [Marisa Fund \(http://www.marisafund.org/\)](http://www.marisafund.org/), a charity that raises money for research, treatment and care of cancer patients. He didn't think they'd collect much; at the time, it was more of a way to channel the outpouring of grief and sympathy.

Since then, through purely grassroots efforts, the fund has raised nearly \$500,000. The group's largest fundraiser is now the 5-mile Turkey Trot, sponsored by the Rockland Road Runners and held every Thanksgiving morning at Rockland Lake. Last year, more than 3,100 people signed up for the race.

"It keeps growing," says Goldwasser, "which is a wonderful thing."

Most of the donations go to the Pediatric Cancer Research Foundation, which provides grants to trailblazing physicians like Dr. Mitchell Cairo, who is now chief of pediatric hematology/oncology and stem cell transplantation at New York Medical College in Valhalla and director of the Children's and Adolescent Blood Disease and Cancer Center at Westchester Medical Center. There, Cairo conducts research in relatively new types of cancer treatments, such as targeted cell therapy.

Cairo, who treated Marisa while at Columbia University, says that she might have benefited from such therapies – if they'd been around back then.

"This just shows in a very short period of time the progress that's been made," Cairo says.

The Marisa Fund also provides financial assistance to families of cancer patients who can't meet out-of-pocket costs, such as paying for an iPad so a child can do homework in the hospital or a babysitter for siblings at home.

"It's the little things we can do that make a difference," Goldwasser says.

There's another way Goldwasser is helping, too, one that's close to his heart. He recently self-published a trilogy of fantasy novels inspired by Marisa's love of the genre. She always told her dad that they should write a sci-fi book together; this is Goldwasser's way of fulfilling that promise. Only a few hundred copies have been sold so far, but a portion of each sale goes to the Marisa Fund.

For Goldwasser, every dollar donated brings doctors closer to a cure.

"I never want another parent to go through what I went through," he says. "To watch your child die? There's nothing worse."

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