

## Pancreatic Cancer

Sometimes unexpected events are wonderful, such as a surprise party, or a visit from an old friend, but some on the other hand are lethal. At the beginning of May in 2009 my dad, was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer, and it would turn out to be a nightmare that I would never awake from. The images of his deterioration still haunt me every time I think of him, probably because he was such a strong man, a roofer, tall, muscular, strong, and dependable, but it would only take less than two months for cancer to erase the fifty years of his life he spent on earth.

The day started out like every other, my brother and I went to school, my mother stayed home with my baby sister, and began the daily activities of cleaning and cooking, and my father left for work, but he would not come home. At about five in the afternoon he would collapse, and his workers would bring him to Stony Brook Hospital where the doctor's would tell him he had Pancreatic Cancer, and not much longer to live. The doctors asked him why he did not come sooner because the cancer was so far spread; they said it must have been very painful every day, but all he said was that he had to work. Our family depended on him, and he did not want to let us down. The doctors would take many tests every day, and he began chemotherapy almost immediately. At first my brother, sister, and I would visit him every day, and he almost seemed normal, but the times we saw him began to get shorter, and farther apart; his physical changes were becoming more apparent.

On May 23<sup>rd</sup>, we visited my dad in the hospital, but today was special, it was his fiftieth birthday, therefore my brother and I pooled our money together to buy him a mug that said "Best Dad" on it, it had a little image of a dad with his family. For the first and last day the air in the hospital room seemed full of life. We were all allowed to stay longer than usual, and were all sad to leave each other. Before leaving I gave my dad a hug good-bye, but I felt something soft, and after squeezing a bit harder I realized it was a pillow underneath his shirt, but I held in my tears until I left the room. He was not getting better, he was still slowly slipping away from my grasp, and all I could do was pray for a miracle.

After this our visits were very short, and the adults began telling my brother and me very little. We always heard them whispering with each other and with the doctors. My brother Kevin was twelve, my baby sister was three and I was

only nine; now I realize why they would not want to tell us anything, but back then it was torture. The silence, the secrecy, I did not understand it at all. If only they knew that they were giving me too much false hope, I genuinely believed he had a chance to get better, a chance to be with us, just one more time, at least one more time, but all along the doctor's said there was no chance, they were only prolonging the inevitable.

My last visit to see my dad came in mid-June, and I will never forget it. My dad looked like a stranger, his cheeks had sunk in, his belly was gone, and his arms were as thin as my brothers, and almost as thin as mine. He looked lifeless, and embarrassed that his kids had to see him in such a weak state. He could barely talk, and we were told to be careful not to touch him too much or too hard because his body was in an extreme amount of pain. Our conversation was dull, school, home, sports, all the usually little things, but I could not wrap my mind around the situation, and in the blink of an eye we were told to say good-bye. He kissed and hugged my brother, and he did the same to me, only when he went to kiss me I turned my cheek to him. I was terrified. I was filled with fear, and he saw it; this is one thing I will always regret. I wish I could have shown him so much more love, but I was too young to realize what I had done, and too young to realize he was saying good-bye, and we would not see him ever again.

My dad died June 29th 2009, less than two months after he was diagnosed. My mother did not allow us to go to the wake, she said he would never have wanted us to see him like that, and she begged us to remember him as the strong man he always was, but we all attended his funeral. To me it all seems like a blur, the funeral was filled with tears, but I cannot remember what I did very well, it was almost as if I was watching from a different point of view, from outside my body because if I realized the situation I think I would have shut down completely. After the ceremonies my family was a wreck, this tragedy did not bring us closer rather it threw us even farther apart, everyone was depressed and distant. Money became a great burden, and we were going to be forced to sell our house, the house our dad built for us.

I do not remember when it began to get livelier in our family atmosphere, I believe it was just a slow progression as time went on. Life did not give us any other choice, but to move forward. Although there were very rough patches, particularly explaining to my little sister that the hospital was not heaven, and attempting to explain why she could not go to heaven for a very long time.

Somehow through all the difficulties we managed, whether it was money, or mental help we had each other to lean on, and we would never take one another for granted again.

For me personally the depression was quite strong, and to this day things still seem to affect me much differently emotionally. The main cause of my depression, besides the obvious, was my loss of faith. I was a girl who grew up in a catholic family, and went to a catholic school, and I poured my heart out to God to get him to save my father, but he never answered my prayers, and without the church I felt like a lost sheep. I questioned God, and how he could let such a thing happen; I wished it was me in my dad's place, because my family needed him, they did not need me. I thought this way until I was about twelve when I began to feel a connection to Mary and Jesus all over again. I could not leave my faith behind, and after a long time I realized how much I missed it. After rekindling my love for the church I began to think a little more positively, and focus my time on volunteering because helping others took me outside of my little world, and threw me into the reality I thought I left behind.

Cancer to me is a monster, it's dark, it's scary, and it leaves everyone it touches in fear, but there is a lesson to be learned in everything, even the most terrifying situations. I learned the shortness of life, and that living everyday like it's your last is the only way to have no regrets. I learned that family bonds cannot be broken by anything, even death; death did not take my dad away from me, he is still with me, and I'll continue to work my hardest to make him proud. I learned that the family I have can be taken away at any moment, and if I do not hold them close I will regret it with my whole being. I learned that with my life I want to do something to help others, not just those who have cancer, but everyone, the homeless, the sick, those hurt by war, and those in third world countries. I still have regrets about my dad, "why didn't you notice he was in pain?", "why didn't you talk more with him?", "why didn't you do more with him?", "the last time you saw him why didn't you kiss him, and tell him he meant the world to you?", "why did you have to turn your cheek to his last kiss you would ever receive?", "Why?"

Although these thoughts haunt my mind, although every time I visit my dad's grave, and see his name, "Michael T. McCabe", written in stone I feel like someone just ripped out my heart, I know that I have to keep living, I have to strive to be the best person I can be for the both of us, because that is the only way I can make him proud, and I so desperately want to make him proud.