

As a child, his inseparable companion was Snuggles the Bear. He needed it, to get him through the chemo and bone marrow transplant he had to undergo at the age of three. But remission was the light at the end of the tunnel and after five years, he was considered cured of his leukemia—until he developed a brain tumor in college that would take his life. I know my Uncle Mike was a fighter, even though I never personally met him, but the impact he had on my family—our closeness, our awareness of the enrichment of health, and an understanding of just how much we could impact our communities for the better—these were the gifts that helped to shape me as a person, giving me a zest for life, an uncommonly strong will, a sensitivity to others, and a desire for advocacy.

I cannot recall a time when my family wasn't involved with the Leukemia and Lymphoma Society in a collaborative effort to end blood cancer. I noticed the magnitude of dedication and enormity of spirit they invested, but like any child, what I saw in my home, I accepted as the norm. I thought every family had a deep-seated cause like ours, and that everyone's parents found an inexhaustible store of energy to devote to it. As a result, I instinctually imitated what I saw, as I developed a desire to be part of something larger. Still, despite the fact that cancer was literally a household word, my family shielded me from many of the details regarding Uncle Mike's struggle: I grew up with an optimistic outlook that allowed me to feel fortunate and happy. It wasn't until I started to ask more questions and gained greater awareness that I realized the toll my uncle's illness had taken on my family; he was my dad's best friend and brother, torn away from each other by a horrible twist of fate. The most heart-wrenching realization was the fact that my father could have been in my Uncle Mike's shoes.

As time passed and my Uncle emerged as more of a complete person in my mind, I took incentive from his presence, whether through the photograph of him in a tuxedo in the foyer, or through the framed speech he had given at my parents' wedding. I could see in his expression and engrained in his words his appreciation of life. Absorbing that joy intensified my desire to take the LLS mission into my own hands. I joined the Student Visionary of the Year campaign, a seven-week philanthropic challenge. I developed a team of a dozen peers and reached out to local communities to achieve our goal. Raising over \$200,000 for blood cancer research with my team and being awarded Student Visionary of the Year was one of the most satisfying experiences of my life. That day, I could look even beyond the admiration of my parents to imagine the pride my uncle would take in our accomplishment. I was also proud to have played a role, however small, in giving greater hope for a successful outcome to other families.

As a child, I didn't realize that the way my parents chose to deal with Uncle Mike's passing was truly extraordinary. I simply absorbed it as a way to react to hardship. However, as I grew, I developed an appreciation of how the strength they passed along to me would translate into action, prompting me to rise to every occasion that called for it. This is the gift my parents gave me: to deal with loss with an appreciation for what we once had, to emerge from grief with purpose and determination, and to cultivate sensitivity and compassion for others who might be facing hardship.