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Beverly Hills Students Lead Fundraiser For Tower Cancer Research

Part 1 in a three part series: Beverly Hills students reflect on the impact of having a parent with cancer

By Laura Coleman

Perhaps the most immediately obvious trait that Beverly Hills High School Varsity soccer players Dani Elitzur, Camilla Wolff and Vivian Geilim share is that they are all vibrant, loving young women. What is less obvious is how dramatically each of them has been affected by cancer.

On Dec. 1, these student athletes will participate in a very special charity game fundraiser for the Tower Cancer Research Foundation, which supports high impact research and clinical trials, and they will each play to honor a parent.

For BHHS junior Dani, who lost her mom to breast cancer when she was in kindergarten at Horace Mann, not a day goes by that she doesn't yearn for her mother. The pain hasn't really lessened as she has grown to understand just what she experienced as a child and she continues to protect herself by keeping what she feels inside, taking solace from occasional conversations with her older sister about the loss of her mother. Dani says that as she gets older, in fact, it gets harder not having her mom around to help guide her and really, be there in every way that one truly does rely on a mother.

"I don't even know if I knew what happened," she recalled of the time when her mom was diagnosed with stage four cancer. "As I get older, you need your parent now."

Dani's mom, Lisa Harris, was once a beloved teacher at BHHS and Dani is now taking the very class, honors physiology, that her mom would have once taught.



Vivian Geilim, Dani Elitzur and Camilla Wolff

"I thought, I would go through something she would go through," she explained.

In fact, Dani's teacher, who took over the class from Mrs. Harris after her passing, uses some of the notes Dani's mom penned years ago.

For BHHS senior Cami, who just lost her dad to Thyroid cancer in May, she's only now beginning to feel the blinding pain associated with his loss. She'd known since she was 11 that her father's cancer diagnosis might one day prove terminal, but still, she always thought, somehow, that he would be around to watch her graduate college and watch her older sisters, and her one day, get married. She expected that he would one day know his grandchildren.

"We were always very optimistic," she described.

But of course what her father was going through was ever-present; he was often in the hospital getting treatment or having surgery.

Cami still remembers celebrating her last birthday at home on April 10 and her dad, who had also been diagnosed with lung cancer by that time, coming into the family room to sing her happy birthday and just not really being able to sing because he was in so much pain and really didn't have much of a voice left – but he tried with all his heart. A month later, on May 14, he died.

"It's just now starting to hit me," she admits. "Every day when I go home I

still expect to see him there. I still call him and I'm like, 'Wait, no one's going to answer.'"

For Cami, soccer is a particularly poignant reminder of her father and a way to feel connected to him.

"He came to every single one of my games...no matter how far away it was or how sick he was," she recalled.

And when things got worse, she said, she mostly kept what she was struggling with – the fear and pain associated to the threat of losing her father – inside of herself, despite knowing that help was all around her. Fortunately, she said, her family, which includes Beverly Vista 1st grade teacher Sarah Wolff, is incredibly close.

BHHS senior Vivian, who is only now beginning to confront all the fear and pain she experienced when her mom was diagnosed with breast cancer, says that she has nothing but admiration for her two friends who continue to thrive despite enduring such incredible loss.

"It's such an honor to be playing with people who are so strong," she said.

While Vivian's mom did get better, the toll that it took on her to watch her mom go through treatment - at times becoming her care giver - was intense.

Like her two friends, she keeps her own story close to her heart, the painful truth of how near she came to losing her own parent still too scary to confront.

"It took over my house," she recalled of her mom's at-home treatments, which at time included her putting an IV in her mom's arm. "It got to a point where it really started to affect me."

Fortunately, her mom did survive following treatments.

For each of these three young women, the upcoming fundraising game on Dec. 1 is an incredibly meaningful opportunity to raise awareness in addition to funds. Already students have raised over \$1,000, and that amount continues to grow daily.

The entire community is invited to watch the kids in action as both boys and girls varsity will be kicking for a cure and playing a soccer match against Windward school. Opening ceremonies begin at 4 p.m. There will be food, live music, local speakers and a moment of silence to commemorate those that have not survived. For more information or to donate visit: www.towercancer.org.