



By Laura-Chase McGehee – The Capital

In the Annapolis home office where she wrote "Embrace the Angel," chronicling the loss of her 4-year-old daughter to cancer, Patti DiMiceli holds the poster she's taking to Washington, D.C., tonight. DiMiceli plans to pace in front of the White House for 22 hours to commemorate the 22 million Americans who've lost their lives to cancer since President Nixon declared a war on the disease 40 years ago.

'22 hours for 22 million'

Annapolis woman holds vigil to mark 40th anniversary of the 'War on Cancer'

By [ERIN COX, Staff Writer](#)

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Tonight, Patti DiMiceli begins a 22-hour vigil pacing in front of the White House to commemorate the 22 million American people who have died since President Richard Nixon declared the "War on Cancer" 40 years ago tomorrow.

Thirty-one years have passed since a grapefruit-sized tumor killed her 4-year-old daughter, Amber. DiMiceli's anger has dimmed, but the Annapolis woman's grief extended eight times longer than Amber's life.

"Before Amber died, I asked her what she wanted people to know about cancer," said DiMiceli, now 58. "She said, 'Don't get it.' "

She hopes her vigil sends that message to President Obama: End the "war." Instead, focus on preventing cancer.

DiMiceli admits the vigil is another way to cope with what she lightly calls "post-traumatic cancer syndrome."

When her daughter was born, DiMiceli began photographing their lives together and recording their conversations because she had a premonition that she wouldn't have more than six years with her little girl. DiMiceli wanted Amber to know her mother even after she died.

But when DiMiceli found a walnut-sized lump behind her daughter's ear in August 1979, DiMiceli realized it was Amber who would die. The focus of her recordings turned to a mother remembering her daughter.

DiMiceli sought publicity in her New Haven, Conn., hometown when she grew frustrated with the treatments doctors gave Amber for a muscle cancer, rhabdomyosarcoma.

She let journalists document the final hours of Amber's life as the little girl died at home in October 1980, dressed in an outfit Amber had picked for the occasion. By then, the tumor had eaten into her daughter's skull and brain.

DiMiceli said she could not find a doctor willing to come to their house to declare Amber dead, in part because she had invited observers to watch her daughter die. DiMiceli tucked her little girl into a bed of blankets in the back of a car and drove her to the emergency room. A block from the hospital, she pulled over the car and snapped another photograph.

"I'm driving, and I can see her in the rear-view mirror," DiMiceli said. "It looked like she was sleeping. Cars were driving by, and life was going on all around us. ... I pulled over, and took a picture. People need to see death. If I opened up my life, then people will know death. They will know cancer. Keeping it behind closed doors doesn't make it go away."

After DiMiceli laid the corpse of her daughter on a stretcher at the emergency room, she touched the tumor behind her little girl's ear.

"I shook it, and it was like jelly," DiMiceli said. "I thought, 'Oh my God. This ate my little girl alive.' "

In the three decades since that day, DiMiceli has turned her archive into a book and a website called "Embrace the Angel." She has founded a nonprofit organization, and intermittently tried to press policymakers to focus on prevention, not funding drug companies that are competing to find a cure.

"We're not fighting the disease," she said. "We're fighting each other."

She held a 27-hour vigil 13 years ago to mark the 27th anniversary of the War on Cancer. Yesterday, she took a break from her professional organizing business and stood in the silk scarves section of the Annapolis Nordstrom, telling strangers about her latest vigil.

"This is bigger than Amber," DiMiceli said. "This is for all the people suffering from cancer, and the people who love them. Knowing there's someone out there who's willing to go out and walk for 22 hours straight, that will give them hope.

"I'll go to my grave with that."

To follow DiMiceli's vigil on Twitter, follow @embrace.the.angel or look for #22Hoursfor22million

Comments:

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A Mother's Love - 2011-12-22 16:36:11 All thoughts and prayers go with you tonight Patti. Hopefully more eyes, hearts and wallets will open because of what you are doing. Christmas miracles do happen!

[Mike B. - annapolis, md](#) - Karma: Excellent