



AMBER CALISTRO, 4, sleeps in the arms of her mother, Patti, in their Milford home shortly before Amber lost her struggle against cancer. — (AP Laserphoto)

Child Loses Battle Against Cancer

By LINDY WASHBURN
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MILFORD, Conn. (AP) — As 4-year-old Amber Calistro lay in a coma, slipping toward an inevitable death from cancer, her mother stood at her bedside snapping pictures she hopes will comfort parents of other sick children.

And when Amber finally died, Patti Calistro said she offered a prayer of thanks to God.

"I feel better now," she said. "Amber is at peace."

Ms. Calistro had been preparing for Amber's death for weeks. Beside the deathbed photos, she has films of Amber's last days and tapes of their conversations. "I've saved every scrap of paper she has drawn on," Ms. Calistro has said.

All the material will be used in a book Ms. Calistro hopes to write about her daughter to help other parents who must watch their children die.

A tiny growth discovered behind Amber's right ear last year was later diagnosed as rhabdomyosarcoma, a form of cancer. She was treated with radiation and metabolic and immunological therapy after an operation last March, but in recent weeks, the tumor grew to the size of a saucer, disfiguring one side of her head.

Amber slipped into a coma shortly after midnight Thursday and died at her home in Milford, a coastal community, at about 2:30 p.m. It was Ms. Calistro's 27th birthday.

"It was beautiful. Suddenly I felt this tremendous energy, as if

ants were all over me. It was as if she had dispersed, and was all around us. I could only say, "Thank you, God, thank you."

"You know," she added, "today is my birthday. It's more than just a coincidence. Her life and her death mean something. Of course, I've cried. But now I feel better. She is at peace."

In the coming weeks, Ms. Calistro said, she will gather together the drawings and photographs of Amber's life, the notes on her disease, and the tapes of her voice. Then Amber can touch all those who reached out to her, Ms. Calistro said.

"They do love her," she said. "Even people she doesn't know, children, have sent letters saying, 'Amber, we love you.'"

Ms. Calistro, an artist who separated from her husband before Amber's disease was discovered, has kept a list of people who have called her, and plans to begin a newsletter.

A few days before Amber died, Ms. Calistro said, "I know what it is like to struggle, and I want to help other people who are going through the same thing needlessly."

She insists that "something must be done" to link the families of dying children, to help parents lend emotional support to one another and to aid the flow of information about alternative cancer treatments and their legal consequences.

Ms. Calistro plans to have Amber's body cremated Monday. Then she will sail on Long Island Sound, scattering her daughter's ashes on the water.