



Kathleen Mezzalingua with a portrait of her daughter Laurie, who died on July 4 after a 12-year battle with breast cancer.

Leaving a Loving Legacy

St. Agatha Foundation to continue Laurie Mezzalingua's spirit of giving

| TEXT BY BARBARA STITH

Wherever Kathleen Mezzalingua goes, someone has a story to tell her about her daughter Laurie.

How Laurie reached out to a little girl depressed about her cancer diagnosis and treatment. Laurie called the girl and asked her, since they were both cancer survivors, if she'd be her personal helper at the annual Race for the Cure.

How Laurie helped a woman who was new to Central New York and didn't know where to turn after she was told she had breast cancer. Laurie told her which doctor to call and where to go for a second opinion. After you do that, Laurie told her, call me and I'll tell you what to do next.

How Laurie learned of a woman living at Vera House, the shelter for victims of domestic violence, who needed cancer treatment. Laurie arranged an appointment not only for that woman but for two of the woman's acquaintances and paid for the treatment.

The stories come to Kathleen Mezzalingua like gifts, welcome reminders of her daughter's generosity. Laurie Mezzalingua died on July 4 at the age of 41, after battling breast cancer for 12 years.

Laurie's spirit of giving is expected to continue for decades. In 2004 she established the St. Agatha Foundation, named for the patron saint of breast diseases, and began quietly offering assistance to women with breast cancer. She gave nearly \$2 million ►

through her organization, some of it for major expenses such as cancer treatment, some of it for smaller, more personal projects: parking reimbursement for people visiting the hospital, massages for women about to undergo procedures.

"She was very, very modest about it," Kathleen says. "She did not want it to be known."

Laurie's foundation, however, is poised to make an even more significant contribution. She left her estate to the St. Agatha Foundation, a bequest that will make it one of the largest philanthropic organizations in Onondaga County. It will rank with the Allyn Foundation, which had assets of more than \$24 million in 2008, and the Rosamond Gifford Foundation, with assets of more than \$18 million.

Laurie made her intentions clear before her death. The money was to benefit those, she said, "who cannot afford their illness."

Long before she became an advocate for cancer patients, Laurie Mezzalingua embraced challenge. She developed her management skills not in a classroom but in the Alaskan wilderness at the National Outdoor Leadership School. She traveled through the Mideast but refused to wear a hijab, the traditional head covering for women that she viewed as a sign of oppression.

She went off to college, graduating from Boston University in 1990, then worked as an editor's assistant at Random House in New York City. She returned to Central New York in 1995 and started working at her family's company, PPC, a manufacturer of connectors for cable and wireless devices.

The diagnosis of breast cancer in 1997, and the mastectomy and chemotherapy that followed, were not enough to derail Laurie. She was learning about every aspect of the family business, and she had enrolled in an intensive summer M.B.A. program at Harvard University. By 1998 she was ready for another challenge: head-



TOP TO BOTTOM, from left, Laurie Mezzalingua, her dad, brother Daniel and sister Kristen on Daniel's first birthday; Laurie at PPC in East Syracuse in 2000; Laurie at the christening of her niece Jacqueline McKenna in 2000; Laurie twice served as chairwoman for the Race for the Cure.

TOP LOWER MIDDLE AND BOTTOM PHOTOGRAPHS COURTESY OF KATHLEEN MEZZALINGUA, UPPER MIDDLE PHOTOGRAPH BY STEPHEN D. CANNERELLI

spoke to her mother about her foundation and her vision for it. She wanted her mother to be its administrator.

"Would you do it for me?" Laurie asked.

"Absolutely," her mother said. "This is

my gift to you."

Administering the foundation will be a difficult job. Its three-member board — Kathleen, Dan and Laurie's youngest brother, Daniel — will need to determine how to govern the organization, manage

its day-to-day activities, invest its funds and distribute grants. They expect to make their first round of awards in 2010.

"I'm still trying to get my arms around the whole thing," Kathleen says. "I really want to be able to do a good

job for her."

On a Sunday after Laurie died, Kathleen was reading the Style section of The New York Times when a quote seemingly leaped off the page: "People don't die of disease, but when their life is complete."

Later that day, Laurie's sister Kristen, who was visiting her parents, told her mother about the quote she'd found in The Times.

"I just read that, too," Kathleen told her.

That night, another sister, Tracy, called from her home in New York City. She wanted to tell her family about the quote she'd read that day in The Times. It was, of course, the same one.

"I know Laurie meant for us to read that," Kathleen says. It was, she's certain, another gift from a daughter whose generosity knew no bounds. ♦



Laurie Mezzalingua wrote about her battle with breast cancer in the Sept./Oct. 2006 issue of Central New York Magazine.

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