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Gina Ruiz beat cancer, now thriving academically after receiving scholarship

August 11, 2008



Gina Ruiz survived cancer, chemotherapy and blood transfusions before she set foot in kindergarten. But her grit did not give her confidence in her own academic potential.

"She would say, 'I don't know if I can do this,' " recalled Arlene Kirkwood, her fifth-grade teacher at Smithfield Elementary School. "I'd say, 'Excuse me, there's nothing not to know.' Sometimes, she needed that little extra confidence boost."

For a reading assignment one day, Kirkwood handed Ruiz a copy of a book that the girl was not expecting. It was "Bridge to Terabithia," Katherine Paterson's Newbery-winning novel about two children and their imaginary kingdom. The challenging themes — and the heightened expectations that came with it — spurred Ruiz.

"She believed in me," Ruiz, now 18, said of Kirkwood. "That started a whole process of going from average, to pushing myself, to excellent."

The young girl began asking Kirkwood questions during recess and working harder to improve.

"She wanted to read more and write better," Kirkwood said. "She wanted to do well. She wanted to be successful."

It paid off. Ruiz recently won a scholarship from the Horatio Alger Association of Distinguished Americans. One of 50 winners in the state and one of 33,000 applicants nationwide, Ruiz received \$5,000 to help pay for college.

Later this month, she will attend Northern Arizona University in Flagstaff to study journalism.

The award also recognized the obstacles she overcame.

Ruiz had been diagnosed with Acute Lymphocytic Leukemia when she was 4, just after she and her family had moved to East Stroudsburg from California by way of Tobyhanna.

Though her hair fell out and she can still remember the sensation of choking back vomit after her chemotherapy, she did not realize that her experience was rare.

"I thought every child went through this," she said. "Kids have a way of accepting things as being part of their rite of passage."

The Alger awards also are given to students from families with "critical financial need," or less than \$50,000 in income. Ruiz's mother, Zoila, worked for 18 years on the assembly line for Laird Technologies, the plant that makes shielding for electronic devices and closed last year. Her older brother, Darrin, has served two tours in Iraq as a Marine.

"I love her more than anything," Ruiz said of her mother. "She worked hard for me and my future."

While Ruiz succeeded academically, she also found ways to enjoy herself during school. She played on the girls soccer team at East Stroudsburg High School-South, and was a placekicker for the boys' football team.

"The guys treated me like a sister," she said, calling her stint on the team one of the best experiences of her high school career.

She and Kirkwood kept contact over the years, and in June her fifth-grade teacher honored a promise to attend her graduation.

"You tend to remember those who helped you," Ruiz said.

"I was the fortunate one to get Gina," Kirkwood said. "I learn from my kids. I think I learned from Gina about surviving and making every day count."