

A cancer victim's legacy of hope

Stricken as a child, Steve never gave up

By Jim Sheeler

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Inside the unfinished basement of his family's Littleton home, Mario Marchello pointed to the black scuff marks streaking the concrete.

"He would be down here for hours every night, hitting the (hockey) pucks," Marchello said, pointing to a hockey goal outlined with tape on one wall. "He got to the point where he could put the puck anywhere he wanted."

Steve Marchello had been a hockey fanatic since he was 4. Growing up in Montana, he played outside on ice-covered ponds until sweat would freeze to his face. When the family moved to Colorado in 1981, the 10-year-old came on skates. Within a few years, he was an all-star at Heritage High School.

It was through hockey that Steve Marchello would discover the condition called Ewing's sarcoma. It was through the cancer that he would learn to teach.

As he stood in his son's practice space in the basement, Mario Marchello picked up a beat-up hockey stick.

"He would go after a puck and he wouldn't give up," Marchello said. "The coaches would say he was good because he doesn't quit." Steve Marchello died at home on Jan. 16 of Ewing's sarcoma. He was 28.

During his sophomore year in high school, a hockey puck hit Steve in the ankle, and his leg was put in a cast. After months of treatment, the ankle refused to heal.

"On Good Friday, they told us it was cancer, Ewing's," said Franci Marchello. "I asked, 'Is it fatal?' and (the doctor) said, 'It could be.'"

When she told her son about the cancer, he had one question.

"The first thing he asked was, 'Can I give it to you and dad?'" she said.

"That's the way he was. He was always more concerned about everyone else."

As one of the oldest patients at Children's Hospital, the 16-year-old saw plenty of kids half his age coming back with recurrences of the same condition he was fighting. He saw many of them die. He refused to let their faces fade.

"One day I came into the hospital and he wasn't in his room," his mother said. "I walked down the corridor, and there he was, pulling his pole with the IV, going around saying 'hi' to everyone. He got into it with the kids. The age didn't make a difference."

Over the next several months, Steve underwent intense chemotherapy and three major surgeries - in his leg, chest and head. Doctors at first had said he would lose his leg and then couldn't guarantee that he would ever walk without a limp. Steve left the hospital and promised he would soon be skating.

During his senior year, he was named captain of the team. By attending medical school, Steve figured he could give back something to the doctors who saved his leg. He decided he wanted to specialize in foot and hand surgery. The decision was cemented as he completed undergraduate work at the University of Arizona, but the inspiration didn't come from a class. During his time in Arizona, he spent four summers as a counselor at Camp Rainbow, a place for children with cancer.

At the camp, he requested to be around the boys in the 9 through 11 year-old age group, and for many, he became a big brother. "He said, 'We always had a good bond,'" his mother remembered. "He said, 'They were 9, and they had cancer, but they could see that I was-21 and still there.'"

As he prepared for his interviews for medical school, Steve Marchello didn't worry about how to dress. He wore an Armani suit and a baseball cap, which covered the scars on his bald head. "If medical schools don't understand why I'm wearing a baseball cap," he asked, "then who will?" Six weeks after he decided to attend the California College of Podiatric Medicine in San Francisco, he headed for the hospital. He needed another round of radiation. Throughout medical school, Steve held close the memories of the kids he had met and the frustrations he felt with adults who didn't treat the children as equals. In class, he gave their memories a voice. "Tell kids exactly what to expect," he reminded both professors and students. "Because they can handle a heck of a lot more than you think they can." Through school, he continued treatments for the cancer, often spending weekends in the hospital so he could attend class the next week. Professors called him an inspiration.

At the end of 1998 - two years into medical school - his arm began bothering him. During medical rounds in the radiology department, he asked his fellow students to give him an X-ray. When they saw the film, everyone knew something was wrong. Further tests indicated that the cancer had shown up in 12 to 15 separate sites in his body, including his brain. "This time," he told a friend, "it will kill me."

On Christmas Day in 1998, after the family had opened presents, Steve - then in immense pain and losing his eyesight - asked his parents to come to his room. Slowly, he began to point out his possessions, and to whom they should go after he died. He still had one more gift. "When he was 1 year old, we bought a life insurance policy for him," Franci Marchello said. "He requested that the insurance money be used to create a scholarship for the kids he'd met along the way."

According to his wishes, the scholarship will be dedicated to children suffering from cancer in Colorado, and the kids at Camp Rainbow - a place Steve continued to speak of.

Courtesy of the Marchello family.

Stephen Marchello used his long battle with Ewing's sarcoma to teach children with cancer and fellow medical students how to deal with the disease. He died in January 1999. He was 28.