

Former lifeguard loses her battle with melanoma

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Glenna Kohl with her dog Marilyn, a source of joy throughout Glenna's three-year battle with melanoma. The former lifeguard and Barnstable High graduate died Thursday.

MARSTONS MILLS — Yesterday afternoon, Glenna Oline Kohl's family sat in the living room of the Race Lane home she loved, overlooking picturesque Mystic Lake as the sun danced between the trees and onto the placid waters below.

Through both tears and smiles they shared their memories of the vivacious 26-year-old, a 2001 Barnstable High School graduate, who succumbed to melanoma at the home on Thursday after a three-year battle.

As family members discussed her attributes, and quirks, it was clear that Kohl touched the lives of everyone who came into contact with her.

She was lovingly eulogized as smart, extremely organized, constantly making and updating "to do" lists, and equally as health conscious, with a brilliant sense of humor and all-American good looks, which included ever-present dimples and an ear-to-ear smile.

Kohl loved sports, music and animals, especially her little dog Marilyn, who never left her side up until the very end.

The former Barnstable lifeguard and occasional tanning-booth patron remained upbeat as she battled the disease, which is the most serious type of skin cancer, according to the Mayo Clinic, one of the world's largest nonprofit health care providers.

She allowed visiting family and friends to put on only positive or funny television shows, like her favorite, comedian Ellen DeGeneres' talk show, despite the side effects of her treatments, which caused her hair to fall out and affected her eyesight, hearing and speech.

But perhaps Kohl's greatest and most long-lasting gifts were her fighting spirit and her desire to help others.

"She felt obligated to want to spread the word," her father, Robert Kohl, said in regard to melanoma awareness. "People think, 'It can't happen to me.' She wanted them to understand that it can."

Kohl's odyssey began in 2005 as she graduated with a degree in business from Salve Regina University in Newport, R.I. She noticed a lump on her upper thigh that she originally thought was a pulled muscle. Doctors took a closer look and she was shocked by her diagnosis, stage three melanoma; it was cancer.

Glenna underwent surgery and radiation, to no avail. As her disease progressed, she told her parents to "bring on" the treatments, even as the regimen got more and more grueling. She was convinced that as long as there were treatments she had not tried, there was hope.

Kohl was determined to beat the disease, but if she was unable to do so, the clinical trials she participated in would help future sufferers of the disease through what doctors were able to learn from her, even if the toll on her frail body was excruciating.

"Melanoma gives cancer a bad name," Robert said. "It's not one where the odds are of you winning."

"She was such a trooper," Glenna's mother, Colleen Kohl, said. Even as Glenna suffered, Colleen Kohl said, she made a point to send packages to a boyfriend and other soldiers stationed in Iraq.

Feeling ill did not keep Glenna from raising awareness about melanoma, and she would speak to anyone who would listen about the dangers of prolonged and unprotected exposure to the sun's ultraviolet rays, even speaking to lawmakers on Beacon Hill in an attempt to advance a bill that would bar children under the age of 18 from tanning booths.

The bill failed, Robert said, but Glenna was still focused on spreading the word. She talked to young girls through the Melanoma Prevention Foundation for Children of Plymouth, parents, and even her fellow Barnstable lifeguards.

Glenna's parents and brother, Jacob, want to memorialize her on the beaches of the Cape that she loved dearly, which would also serve as a reminder of the dangers of tanning and prolonged exposure to the sun.

"She just wanted to help others," Colleen said. "We want to keep her involved in awareness. If people think about Glenna, it will make a difference."

Services for Glenna Kohl are being held today, with a graveside service open to all at 10 a.m. in Marstons Mills Cemetery, followed by an 11 a.m. memorial service in West Parish, Route 149, West Barnstable.

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