

Rutgers Alumna Gains Strength in Battle Against Cancer from Supporters

Scarlet Knights women's basketball team rallies around its former student manager

By Sherrie Negrea | January 17, 2017



Gianna DeVeitro, right, with C. Vivian Stringer, head coach of the Scarlet Knights. Gianna is a former student manager of the women's basketball team.

Photo: Courtesy of Larry Perfetti
[High Res](#)

Gianna DeVeitro '16 had just graduated from Rutgers and celebrated the end of college by visiting a friend in Florida. She was back home in New Jersey looking for a job at a TV station or magazine when she suddenly began having severe abdominal pain and a fever.

Her family physician suspected acid reflux, but when her pain intensified, DeVeitro was sent to Inspira Medical Center Woodbury, near her home in Deptford. She was released but readmitted two days later when her fever reached 102, and this time, her doctor ordered a blood analysis. "When the pathologist was looking at the blood smear, they then noticed I had abnormal cells, and they knew I had leukemia," DeVeitro says.

Her diagnosis of acute myeloid leukemia last July began a roller-coaster of treatment that has consumed DeVeitro's life, from her first round of chemotherapy (which failed) to the second, followed by a bone marrow transplant at the Hospital of the University of Pennsylvania. A week after her potentially life-saving transplant, a drug she was allergic to caused her temperature to spike to nearly 107.

Through it all, however, DeVeitro has been comforted in her battle against cancer by the support of a close-knit group of Rutgers alumni, athletes and coaches who have one thing in common: Rutgers women's basketball. Since

her diagnosis, Scarlet Knights team members, coaches and fans have all rallied round DeVietro, who was a student manager of the team and a member of the Rutgers Women's Club Basketball.

As a student manager for the team for two years, DeVietro spent up to five hours a day scheduling and tracking the players' practice, timing their drills and buying groceries and drinks for the girls. "Everyone wants to give back to Gianna because she gave so much to us," says C. Vivian Stringer, head coach of the Scarlet Knights. "She's so young and beautiful, and the world's ahead of her – and then for this to happen."

Just five days before her bone-marrow transplant in November, Stringer and the entire team visited DeVietro at the Hospital of the University of Pennsylvania after their game at Drexel University in Philadelphia. Stringer recalls how impressed she was with DeVietro's positive attitude toward her treatment.

"It did us well to feel the energy and see what it means to have a spirit of fight inside," says Stringer, adding that DeVietro reminded her of her father, who had both his legs amputated but then went back to work as a coal miner. "Gianna is a living spirit for all of us."

DeVietro's fight to overcome leukemia also attracted the attention of Larry Perfetti, a three-time Rutgers graduate and retired psychologist whose daughter Kiersten died of cancer when she was 22. Like her parents, Kiersten, who had attended Goucher College for one year before her diagnosis, was a loyal Scarlet Knights fan.

"She was the most fanatic of the Rutgers women's basketball fans," says Perfetti, a Highland Park resident who once brought his family to France to accompany the basketball team on tour. "She considered Coach Stringer her basketball mother. Coach Stringer taught her how to play basketball, and she was very encouraging. And Coach Stringer flew back from Iowa to attend our daughter's wake."

A year before she died in 2008, Kiersten founded a nonprofit called Kier's Kidz to raise money to help children and young adults with cancer by funding organizations such as the Ronald McDonald House and Alex's Lemonade Stand. Since Kier's Kidz received tax-exempt status in 2012, it has provided direct financial and emotional support to children and young adults with cancer and their families.

In October, Perfetti, the CEO of Kier's Kidz, created a crowd-funding site on the platform youcaring.com to help DeVietro's family with their financial hardships. DeVietro mother, Tina, who is single, was forced to quit her job as a medical assistant last August so she could provide round-the-clock care for Gianna. The crowd-funding campaign has so far raised \$3,725 of its



Coach Stringer and the Scarlet Knights team visit DeVietro, center, at the Hospital of the University of Pennsylvania.

Photo; Courtesy of Larry Perfetti

targeted \$35,000 needed to help the family survive financially until Tina can return to work, Perfetti says.

Since her release from the hospital the day after Thanksgiving, DeVietro has been recovering at home while recording her daily progress on her Facebook page, [One Cell At A Time](#). She still plans to use her journalism and media studies degree from Rutgers' [School of Communication and Information](#) to find a job but also hopes to write a book about her experience battling leukemia.

Her goal is to educate people about the disease and the need for bone marrow donors to help patients overcome it. "I just want to bring as much awareness about leukemia as possible," she says. "And I just want more people to become donors, because it really does save lives."

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