



Family, Friends To Memorialize Life of UCSB Student

Second-Year Danny Riley Dies From Rare Brain Tumor; Family Sets Up Fund

Danny Riley rode his bicycle to class for the last time on Oct. 11.

Just 20 days later, the second-year English major passed away of a rare brain tumor. According to Catherine Omalev, her boyfriend wasn't about to let cancer make him swear off classes.

"Danny wasn't 'cancer boy,'" second-year environmental studies major Omalev said. "We look at it as he did beat the cancer. For a lot of people in the weeks leading up to the end, they're like, 'Where's the miracle?' For his family and I, Danny is the miracle."

Riley was diagnosed with the rare illness known as Pleomorphic Xanthoastrocytoma in 2004. The 19-year-old UCSB student fought the disease, which is generally benign, with several surgeries and rounds of chemotherapy that slowed the aggressive cancer. He passed away on Oct. 31 at about 3 a.m. A memorial service will take place on Nov. 17 in San Diego at 7 p.m. In lieu of flowers, Riley's family requests that attendees contribute to the Danny Riley Celebration of Life Fund, which will help children learn to live with cancer through music.

According to Riley's mother, Margaret Baker, when her son grew too ill to stay at school, his friends and family surrounded him, playing music and spending time in his company.

"There were 20 or 25 people [with him] each night trying to make sure Danny was really comfortable and the house was full of laughter and music and love," Baker said.

Baker said her son liked to express himself by writing music and singing along to the guitar he taught himself to play in high school.

"That guitar and his own signing voice was where he sounded best," Baker said. "He had a gift. In his short life he wrote a lot of nice songs."

Riley shared his passion for music with his cousin, UCSB alumnus Jack Johnson. Baker said her son sang a harmony for one of Johnson's upcoming songs, and chatted with musician Ben Harper about life and music. Omalev said her boyfriend was a gifted musician.

"Danny is a born writer and a born poet," Omalev said. "He would just write and formulate his own tunes in his head."

Omalev said that when Riley's health failed to improve after a recent operation, she and his family focused on spending their remaining time doing what he loved - enjoying life.

"He had a surgery over summer and it really was a life or death situation for him," Omalev said. "We knew he wasn't cured, but they also told us at the same time that he would have a couple months. For me it wasn't 'He's going to die, he's going to die,' it was more like 'Let's live.'"

Riley's roommate, second-year psychology major Mike Bosetti, said he admired his friend's drive to continue with his daily life in the face of his illness.

"Danny never got down on himself or blamed the cancer for anything," Bosetti said. "He threw up in a couple of classes. He just opened his backpack, threw up and stayed the rest of the class. He was such a fighter."

Brain tumors have the potential to alter one's personality as they grow. According to his mother, Riley's family and friends were happy that his particular case stayed on the periphery of his brain, leaving his nature untouched.

"[Cancer] never affected his personality," Baker said. "He was lucid to within 12 hours of dying. It was wonderful. He did a lot of good things in the end and was able to communicate his needs."

Baker said that before he died, Riley wrote on his computer that he did not want to be remembered for his accomplishments, but for those he loved.

"The last thing he did was to point to his LIVESTRONG Lance Armstrong bracelet," Baker said. "Somebody once asked him how he dealt with this, and he said, 'Life.' He just really embodied love."