

Daniel Riley, 19; 'enjoyed everything he did'

All Daniel Riley really wanted was to live a normal life. Yet, his life was anything but that.

As a student, he excelled in the classroom, often challenging his teachers or other students on their inconsistencies.

He had a girlfriend who shared his enthusiasm for life and encouraged him to do whatever he wanted to do.

He had a wide circle of friends, nearly all of whom felt they had a special relationship with him.

And he battled brain cancer for nearly three years after being diagnosed while he was in high school.

Mr. Riley died Oct. 31 in Santa Barbara where he attended college. He was 19.

Mr. Riley lived his life with a force of conviction that put others at ease and helped them deal with his disease.

"He would say, 'Yeah, I have cancer and I live with it,'" said his girlfriend, Catherine Omalev. "And then he wanted to move on."

Mr. Riley was a junior at Eastlake High School in Chula Vista when he was diagnosed with a brain tumor in December 2004. He had three surgeries and innumerable chemotherapy sessions during his battle.

Although he recognized the severity of his illness, he regularly joked about it and never talked about his pain.

"He never brought it up," said Charlie Sarosy, Eastlake student body president and a friend. "He would talk about it if someone wanted to, but you had to bring it up. The feeling everybody had is that no one could have handled this as well as Daniel."

Mr. Riley always seemed to do well in school, even when illness forced him to miss classes.

"Danny loved to learn," teacher John Raue said. "As a teacher, you can see the spark in the eyes of someone like that. But he wasn't going to let the cancer change who he was. Despite being out of school for three weeks and in an Advanced Placement class, he was still able to turn in every bit of work on time."

Robert Hughes, Eastlake's dean of students, said Mr. Riley was a leader with a magnetism that attracted people to him.

"This kid enjoyed everything he did all day, and everyone around him seemed to know that," Hughes said. "That made a substantial impact on them."

Mr. Riley wrote about his disease in his application to the University of California Santa Barbara. He was admitted and made the dean's list even with interruptions for medical treatment.

He studied English at UCSB and wrote many songs during that time. He took piano and saxophone lessons earlier in his life, but by the time he got to college, he played guitar.

Mr. Riley's cousin is the popular rock singer Jack Johnson, who invited him to sing background vocals on his new recording. Johnson visited Mr. Riley shortly before his death to play him an unreleased version of his new CD so Mr. Riley could hear himself sing.

"Danny was so excited that he got to hear this before anyone else," said his mother, Margaret Baker. "He was really honored by that."

After Mr. Riley's death, his family found more than 100 poems he had written on his computer. He had not shared those poems with anyone.

"He wrote songs, but they were really music driven," his mother said. "But when you read these poems, you see how well he could write and the intensity he had. It was really amazing to find them."

Despite the surgeries and numerous medical appointments, Mr. Riley continued his studies at UC Santa Barbara until three weeks before his death.

Mr. Riley is survived by his parents, Frank Riley and Margaret Baker of Chula Vista; sister, Alicia Riley of Palo Alto; and grandfather, Gordon Baker of Carlsbad.

A Mass and celebration of life will be held at 7 p.m. Saturday in the St. Francis Chapel at Mission San Diego de Alcalá, 10818 San Diego Mission Road, San Diego.

The family suggests donations to the Danny Riley Celebration of Life Fund at Family House, 50 Irving St., San Francisco, CA 94122.