

CHAT ROOM

MARY RODRIQUE

A simple wish for Sweet 16 – good health

She looks tiny but beautiful asleep in her hospital bed. Like the princess with long golden locks waiting for Prince Charming to kiss her on the cheek, rousing her from slumber to ride off into the sunset and live happily ever after.

But this isn't a fairy tale. It's reality. With garish lighting and beeping machinery and professional staff scurrying about. It's grueling and relentless and it somehow leaves time suspended in an unreal state.

Her mother spends each day and night at her daughter's bedside, keeping a vigil, watching for signs of improvement that seem to come much too slowly. Mundane household tasks would be a welcome diversion. To be home vacuuming dog fur from the carpeting would mean life has returned to normal. That Nicole is back in the 10th grade studying biology and French, going to dances and the shopping mall with friends.

But she lies motionless in a hospital room, strapped to wires and monitors that record everything happening inside her body.

Time stands still

It started over a year ago. An aggressive disease that hit her with unusual vigor. Like a category five hurricane. Two Christmases lost in a blur of hospitalizations and tests. Two New Years come and gone. More poking and prodding, more scans and surgeries. Now pneumonia and physical therapy sessions to work muscles that have laid motionless too long.

Her 16th birthday is coming up this Sunday. It is the second birthday in a row she'll spend in the hospital. While her friends look forward to obtaining the much anticipated driver's license at this age, Nicole hasn't yet had the time to take a driver's education course. That's on the back burner, as is so much else these days.

Her mother, my friend since we were in fourth grade together, describes the past year as "lost time." Everything is suspended. On hold until Nicole gets better. This sweet girl who had a perfectly normal childhood, earned all As in school, had her photo published in the local newspaper for winning dance competitions. This child who played Mary in the eighth grade Christmas pageant ... the last Christmas she was healthy.

If there was a way to will her back to good health, she would be there. With bells on. Hopefully prayer is sustaining her and her family, including her dad and younger sister. Such a difficult time for everybody.

For my friend, I wish a return to normalcy. That the biggest irritation in life will be the amount of time her daughter spends on the phone or the computer or arguing about her Saturday night curfew. That she will cry about a bad hair day or something equally trivial. Just for a change.

For Nicole, I wish Godspeed and good health. That the next time she walks into a hospital, it will be to visit someone else.

Happy Sweet 16, Nicole. And get well soon.

■ Olympic Gold medal winner Sheila Taormina will address the Child Abuse Council of Oakland County on Jan. 31 at Glen Oaks in Farmington Hills.

BY STEPHANIE ANGELYN CASOLA
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While training for the 1996 Olympics, Livonia's Sheila Taormina didn't realize she might also be learning lessons that would lead her to a second career.

Taormina won a gold medal as part of a swim relay team that year, and became a sixth place winner in the first-ever women's Olympic Triathlon team in Sydney last year. She knows what it feels like to be a success. She's chosen to teach others the life lessons she's encountered and to help them discover the meaning of success in their own lives.

"Preparing for athletic events is not much different than what a business person (might do to succeed)," she said during a phone interview from her Livonia home. "What it leads up to is, 'What is your definition of success?'"

Taormina will share that lesson at the Child Abuse and Neglect Council of Oakland County's fifth anniversary luncheon of the Circle of Friends, 11:30 a.m. Wednesday, Jan. 31 at Glen Oaks Country Club in Farmington Hills.

Dr. Judith Hoeffler, executive director of the Child Abuse and Neglect Council, said Taormina will teach others what it takes to be a winner – which is something the Child Abuse and Neglect Council attempts to teach all of the children it serves.

"Children need to have hope to go for the Olympics in their lives," said Hoeffler. "Whatever that is."

Inspired

Elyse Fastel, Folsom, a Birmingham resident and event chair, first heard

Taormina speak on the subject of teamwork at her daughter's school. She felt the message was both appropriate and inspiring for the luncheon. Rather than follow suit and invite a keynote speaker to talk specifically about child abuse, Taormina could offer uplifting advice and encourage the audience to make an impact.

"Every person can positively affect and change the world in which we live and the community in which we live and make it a better place for children to grow," said Poltyn.

As a mother, the battle against child abuse is one she's willing to fight. Through her work with the Circle of Friends, Poltyn hopes to inspire others to get involved. Projects like the Care House in Pontiac is just one example of such progress.

Giving back

Speaking before the Child Abuse and Neglect Council means a lot to Taormina. She said she realizes how fortunate she has been to grow up with loving parents. "So many times, Olympic athletes think 'I'm number one in the world,'" she said. But she acknowledged that it's a small percentage of the population that have been blessed with the opportunities necessary to help them reach the Olympics.

"The human spirit has so much capacity to love," she said. "That's what I see in this organization. It makes me thankful in my life."

For Taormina, motivational speaking evolved from her athletic endeavors. After winning the gold medal, she returned to her job as a quality representative for an auto industry supply firm in the metro area. Around the same time, she began taking offers to speak about her experiences as an Olympic athlete. It started out on a volunteer basis. She would visit schools and Kiwanis club meetings on her lunch hour to tell her story.

Realizing soon enough that her vacation time was filled with such engage-



STAFF PHOTO BY TOM HAWLEY

Guest speaker: Sheila Taormina will share her message of success at a luncheon sponsored by the Oakland County Child Abuse and Neglect Council at Glen Oaks next Wednesday.

ments, Taormina took some good advice. "My boss gave me his blessing. He said 'Go for it ... If you fall flat on your face, you can always have your job back.'"

With little risk involved, she started her own company, Taormina & Associates, Inc., and has taken her motivational speaking talents around the world. She often books speeches and

guest appearances to coincide with her athletic events and swimming clinics. While Taormina wouldn't offer any of her secrets to success beforehand, she will talk about fear of failure and the quest to truly enjoy every day of life at the upcoming luncheon.

For more information, contact the Child Abuse and Neglect Council of (248) 332-7173.

Pop-A-Top helps kidney dialysis program



STAFF PHOTO BY BILL DANIELS

Heave-Ho: Donnell Davis and Marcel Eadie hoist a heavy bag of pop-can tabs with a little help from Pops, a member of the Jokers Motorcycle Club. Pops collected the tabs from his club's other members.

William Grace Elementary students continue a service project launched by Jennifer Hoemke, Miss Farmington 1997, called "Pop-A-Top For Kidney Dialysis." Recently the school got a big boost from the Jokers Motorcycle Club of Detroit which donated 50 pounds of tabs.

Student council, teachers and staff are all collecting the tabs off soda, juice and fruit cans. Each class has a container donated by Andrea Anderson to fill. The winning class will have a pizza party, courtesy of Papa John's Pizza in Farmington.

All tabs are weighed by Haggerty Metal and all money will go to Children's Hospital in Detroit for children and adults on kidney dialysis.

Drop off your tabs during regular school hours, 8 a.m. to 3 p.m. William Grace is at 29040 Shawwassee, between Middlebelt and Inkster, a block south of Nine Mile.



Tops Galore: Benji Card and Donnell Davis are ready for the aluminum drive.

Black history

Underground Railroad program set



Willie Payne

slaves escape to Canada at the end of the Civil War. But the house was built after that in

The historic tunnel in the Longacre House of Farmington Hills is quite mysterious. The original owner of the house, Palmer Sherman, helped 13

1869. Did Sherman think he would have a reason to use a secret tunnel? The highly regarded program *The Underground Railroad's Michigan Connection* returns to the historic Georgian style mansion on Saturday, Feb. 3.

Author, historian and storyteller Willie Payne illustrates with song and dance the southern American slaves' struggle to flee captivity. People and places in Oakland and Wayne counties that aided them are highlighted.

This performance will run 5-6:30 p.m. Tickets are \$10 for adults, \$5 for students. Advance tickets to guarantee a seat to this popular return engagement can be made at the Longacre House, 24705 Farmington Road, between 10 and 11 Mile roads or by phone at 477-8404.



Slogan: Erica Yurk made a sign to promote the pop top drive.