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WRITING SAMPLE

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A Mother's Days

By Mary Ann Roser

Regina Fabian dreaded this moment. Weeks had passed, and it was time to tell her children what was wrong.

Five small faces looked up at her, trying to understand. They had never heard the word "cancer," and Regina had to force herself to say it.

Cancer is a disease people get when something goes wrong in their bodies, she said. My hair might fall out.

Won't that look funny? her 4-year-old twin girls wanted to know.

I'll get lots of hats, Regina said.

Then came a question that stopped her: Would she get better?

Regina looked at her children. She had plans for them — with them. They would have a house with a big porch and a garden. Someday, they'd visit Disney World. Her oldest, Albert, was only 7. What would he be like after today? What about the other four? Would their childhoods be happy?

No, she finally said, I'm not going to get better.

She might have stopped there. She had terminal breast cancer and was wracked by despair. But she couldn't leave her children without hope.

She was working with the doctor to get strong again, she told them. She was not giving up.

Regina, then 30, had no idea on this fall day in 2002 how cancer would possess each of them and change them. But one thing she did know: She wanted to be a better mom.

In the weeks she recuperated at her mom's house in far South Austin after her initial treatment, she reviewed her life as a mother. She played a home video that her partner and the children's father, Albert Zamora, was constantly showing them. She was struck by what she saw: While everyone else was having fun, she was darting in and out of the scenes.

"I'm watching myself almost not being a part of the family, " she said. ". . . So uncomfortable."

Regina didn't hug her kids much or tell them she loved them. It was as if something inside her was closed off. Then it hit her. She was acting like most of the women in her family. She did housework and took care of the children, just as her mother had done for her, her two half sisters and her half brother. Her father had abandoned her mother when she was pregnant with Regina, the oldest. Her grandparents helped raise them in East Austin.

Though Regina knew she was loved, she said, "I didn't see many loving gestures."

She felt uncomfortable showing affection. "A hug used to be like pins and needles, " she said. "My best friend used to hug me . . . and I was screaming inside."

She resolved to show her feelings more to her children, to leave them with memories of the fun they shared and the values she lived.

Regina started a journal about her cancer. She kept another one about each of her kids: Albert, who was in such a hurry to grow up; Ernest, who was 6 and always asking such deep questions; Reynaldo, who was 5 and having a hard time talking about his feelings; and twins Leah, the talkative one, and Merina, who doesn't let on what she feels.

Someday they will get a glimpse of how a mother frets over her children and loves them like no one else.

"If I haven't done anything else in my life, I have to do this right, " Regina said, tears filling her eyes. "Mothers are heroes to their kids. I don't want to be a fallen hero."

Telling the children about her cancer was a relief, but it did not bring her peace. Regina was terrified. What if she never felt better again? What if she died? What would happen to her kids?

Albert and the children moved from the family's public housing apartment at Booker T. Washington Terraces to join Regina at her mother's house. Regina was trying to quell the panic inside her. Everything was happening so fast, just like the courtship with Albert.

They had worked together at an Austin supermarket where Regina got a job after a year of college in San Antonio. She invited Albert to church. He said yes.

They became a couple, and soon the children came. Money was always tight, and Regina, who wanted a big family, was overwhelmed.

"When they were really small and Albert was working all the time, I was their sole caretaker," she said. "They were so dependent on me. I had basically four kids in diapers."

Now, she was lying around, constantly feeling sick and depressed. She was vomiting in the bathroom, a side effect, she thinks, of a pain patch. The children watched their father carry in a glass of water and a wet towel. When he was at work, they took over.

Suddenly, the little ones were taking care of her. Life was off kilter.

Regina would be starting chemotherapy in the spring of 2003 and would need her strength. Her children would need it, too.

She heard that people were praying for her. She became hopeful — maybe she wouldn't die after all — and drew her children closer.

"I used to read them bedtime stories and play around, but I felt like that wasn't enough," she said. "I started slowly getting closer (and would say), 'I love you; come sit with me; come hang out with me; come talk.'

"It took cancer to do that."

She sees a shyness in her children, a lack of confidence. She was like that, too.

"It was mostly me feeling down about myself," she said.

In the journal, her message to all five is, "You're smart and beautiful. Don't let anyone tell you you're not."

The disease finally became real for the children when Regina's hair fell out. She spent much of 2003 going from one medical appointment to another and undergoing two rounds of chemotherapy.

The girls were in preschool, and although Merina wasn't showing her feelings, Leah was crying under her desk. Ernest was talking about Mommy's cancer, even drawing pictures, but Albert and Reynaldo kept their emotions bottled up. At times, they were angry. Reynaldo acted out, Regina said. He was kicking things, crawling under desks, knocking things down. Invariably, the school would call her to get him.

Regina tried to talk to him, but he would just cry. Gradually, he opened up. He said he couldn't stop once he started.

"I would go get chemotherapy, and I would end up at the school, and I was dead tired," she said. "It was pretty much every day."

It became clear to Regina that Reynaldo misbehaved out of frustration because he hated being away from her and couldn't verbalize his feelings.

She got counseling, for herself and for the children. She wanted them to understand cancer better so they'd fear it less. Child life specialists with Wonders & Worries, an Austin organization that provides support to families grappling with a serious illness, took them to a cancer clinic and showed the children — using dolls — how a catheter infuses drugs for chemotherapy.

"Both Leah and Merina were real methodical and would do the same things over and over and would act out with the dolls," child life specialist Kim Fryar said. The girls were fixated on the dolls' hair because they had seen Regina lose hers and then grow it again, she said.

"The boys were much more aggressive and used (the catheter) needles not always appropriately," which is normal, Fryar said. "They were getting their feelings out."

For herself, Regina got help from a support group with the Breast Cancer Resource Center and drew on strength from the staff and her care team at the Shivers Cancer Center at Brackenridge Hospital. Volunteers from the Interfaith Care Alliance helped with many tasks, but even more, they gave Regina comfort and love.

To relieve stress, she sang through some chemotherapy treatments. Her family has a tradition of singing — her grandparents were musicians, and her Uncle Pete Fabian played in a conjunto band. She had found singing in the Johnston High School choir a way to break out of her shyness.

She bought a karaoke machine in 2003 and often entertained the kids with it.

"This is dedicated to my daughter, Merina, who is upside down right now," Regina would joke at home before belting out a rocker in her crooning alto.

One day at the Shivers center, Regina brought in her karaoke machine and sang to the other patients to cheer them.

David Zuniga, the chaplain at Shivers, who grew close to Regina, said he was walking through the clinic one morning when her voice stopped him in his stride. It was one of the loveliest experiences he had ever had as a chaplain, he said. "All of the patients and nurses were transformed by it."

In spring 2004, Regina was feeling better. Her cancer, although it had spread to her bones by the time it was discovered, was stable. The Breast Cancer Resource Center hired her as an

outreach manager to help other minority women with the disease find community resources. Regina was thrilled to land a job with health insurance. And she wanted her children to see her giving back. But by summer, her life started spiraling downward.

Her doctor had bad news. Regina's tumors were growing again; he recommended a double mastectomy. Regina agreed and was scared but upbeat. She would do anything to stay healthy for her kids.

Six weeks after the July 1, 2004, surgery, she went back to work. But she was having problems with her partner and became overwhelmed. Her performance suffered, and center officials said, after much counseling, that they had to let her go.

With no health insurance or income, Regina's financial problems escalated.

By summer 2005, Albert had left her. He told her he had fallen in love with someone else. Regina was devastated. She believed that once you chose someone, had children with him, it was forever.

Then, her mother's house, where Regina and her children still lived, was being foreclosed on. Regina's daily search for an apartment came up empty.

She was so distraught that she wrote in her journal about longing for a peaceful death.

"My children have been wonderful to have, they have been my heart, " she wrote. "I pray they will forgive me for leaving. I promise I will come back and whisper hello in your ear. I promise to love you for all eternity. . . .Do not forget me."

Moving day came, and she told her children, "We're going to the big house." They didn't understand, and Regina was so ashamed she didn't want anyone to know. Their new home was the Salvation Army's Austin Shelter for Women and Children.

The six of them slept in bunk beds, wedged in one room. Some days, the children rose before sunup to catch a van across town to their school, Palm Elementary. On the worst day, Albert and Reynaldo fought, and another resident summoned a counselor. Regina was scared they might all get kicked out. She wanted out badly, but they had no place else to go.

The worst part was, she felt as if she had let her kids down. They missed playing outside and hiking at McKinney Falls, a place they all loved.

It seemed impossible to make the memories Regina wanted for her children.

But in July 2005, they went on a bat-watching cruise on Town Lake, courtesy of Wonders & Worries. It wasn't Disney World, but it was the first time any of them had seen one of Austin's biggest attractions. She and the children found seats on the boat's upper deck,

though the kids didn't sit long. They munched on Cheez-Its and ran to the lower deck, then back to shower Regina with hugs and free Mardi Gras beads.

The girls were in and out of Regina's lap, hugging and kissing her. The boys explored, telling Mom what they had seen: people in kayaks, a huge turtle, graceful swans. Up and down the ladder they went, and Regina let them run, at peace, as she often is, with childhood chaos.

Once the bats took flight, the children settled into chairs beside her.

"How many are there?" Ernest asked. "A thousand?"

"Count them, " Regina teased him.

"They're getting closer, " Reynaldo said, ducking as the bats seemed to swoop at him.

"There are millions and millions of them, " Merina said, reaching her arms up and twirling. "It's Christmas Day; it's Happy New Year's Day and Valentine's Day."

Regina beamed; at least they made one happy memory that month.

After nearly three months in the shelter, she learned of a public housing duplex in South Austin. Regina liked the neighborhood. The school was decent. And the house had a yard.

But the City of Austin said she owed \$1,700 on an old utility bill from Booker T., a bill Regina insisted she had paid and could not afford now. Volunteers helped her scrape together the money; an anonymous donor gave her \$1,000 so she could buy a van.

Regina and her children moved in the first week of October. The normal life that she wanted so badly seemed within reach.

Regina recently tossed a football with her sons. It had been a long time since she had played outside with them, said her oldest son, Albert, now 11.

Regina wishes she could play with them more, but she is having trouble walking because the cancer is attacking her bones. "I want them to see me happy, " she said. "I want them to know a memory of me that is not just me struggling."

Regina never wanted to be one of those mothers who forced her kids to go to church. But after she got sick, she wanted them to know they could turn to God. She took them to Dolores Catholic Church, next door to the house where she grew up.

When she prays, she said, she thanks God first for letting her see another day. Her most fervent prayer never changes: Please let me live until my children are teenagers. After Mass

one Sunday in April, they all waited in a long line in the church hall for breakfast tacos and pancakes.

"This is boring. Can you drop us off?" Albert pleaded.

Regina explained, patiently, that she had no place to take them. After eating, she had one last choir practice before Easter.

Do they know why she insists on taking them to church?

"She tells us it's important because we can always turn to God, " Reynaldo said.

"She wants us to thank him for what he has done for us, " Albert said.

Regina knows her values are one of the few things she can leave them.

"Even when you don't have your mom, you think back on what she said to you, " she said.

It's been nearly four years since her cancer diagnosis, and Regina's children are growing up.

Albert will be 12 in November. He feels a heavy responsibility to help take care of his brothers and sisters, Regina said.

"He always feels like he has to watch over everybody, and he doesn't want to, " she said. "I tell him, 'I want you to be a kid. I'm worrying about everything for us.' "

Their father, who lives with them off and on, said he is prepared to take the kids any time.

Reynaldo, 9, is much calmer now, she said. Ernest, 10, is still asking his probing questions.

One night recently, she and Ernest were lying on the bed in her room. How, he asked her, can a person keep from crying?

Regina said people have different ways. She takes deep breaths, she said. Why?

I think if I start, he said, I won't be able to stop.

Oh, Ernest, she said, wiping a tear from her eye.

Is she afraid to die? he asks her.

"Not anymore, " she says. "I'm not going to be suffering. I'm not going to be in pain. I'm not going to be worrying about money.

"I tell him it's a beautiful place on the other side."

The girls, now 7, write Regina love notes. They helped teachers from their newest school, Dawson Elementary, make Regina's room more restful. Merina copied a Bible verse on paper that Regina framed. It says, in part: "I have heard your prayers and seen your tears; I will heal you."

Sometimes, Regina said, the cancer makes her thankful.

"It is an opportunity for me to see exactly how shiny the sun is, how green the trees are and how much that person really means to me, " she said. "Sometimes, our goals are small, but when it comes to love and it comes to appreciation, the world becomes big."

Yes, there are days when she is still overwhelmed, afraid she will soon be in a wheelchair, scared the children's father won't be ready to raise them alone.

She is still trying to be the mother she wants to be. She worries time is short. Sometimes, she wants to hide, but then she sees five small faces looking up at her.

And nothing else matters.

"I want them to be good mothers one day, good fathers one day. Good people, " Regina said. "When it all comes down to it, they're the only ones who will remember what I did."