

Mayo Clinic Transcript 12/4/2014  
Claire's Story

DAVID (Claire's Father): Everyone talks about lightning striking the ground, but we've come to understand that before lightning strikes, the ground something comes up from the earth and it actually connects and it closes the circuit and I think whichever part of what would be Claire, she was able to engage the other component. She would start to pull that counter strike, if you will, to close the circuit. That's just how she worked.

LAURA (Claire's Friend): She was never disengaged, like so many people are when you have a conversation. You know, you can talk about whatever for hours, but with her it took your entire mental capacity to just engage her and -- and she just wanted to understand exactly what you were feeling, what you were going through. She just was like this sponge that wanted to soak up everything, and it made you want to do the same thing.

GAIL (Claire's mother): Claire was diagnosed with stage III malignant melanoma in June of 2010. She then proceeded to have an excision biopsy, I think it's called, and -- in August and went back to school that fall as a junior in college. So she was 20 years old when she was diagnosed.

DAVID: When she first went to Boston to go to school, she was thinking, well, maybe philosophy, maybe physics, and she took a philosophy class and then said, well, I guess it's going to be physics and then she took a lot of physics classes. That was a link to medicine.

*(Role-play)*

CLAIRE RICHARDS: I'm Claire Richards. How are you doing today?

PATIENT: Oh, I'm okay.

CLAIRE RICHARDS: You seem a little nervous.

DR. HEATHER HEIMAN (Northwestern University Feinberg School of Medicine): The class is a really beginning class of how to get used to interviewing patients, to just sitting with a patient, even how to introduce yourself to a patient. Students come in at very variable abilities in that class. When I sat and watched Claire interview this patient, I just knew that she had some additional knowledge.

*(Role-play)*

CLAIRE RICHARDS: Yeah, we'll take care of it.

PATIENT: Okay. Great. Thank you.

CLAIRE RICHARDS: Thanks so much for coming in.

PATIENT: Thank you.

CLAIRE RICHARDS: Yep.

DR. HEATHER HEIMAN: I try to have a one-on-one meeting with every student and I said you -- you have knowledge. You must have worked in medicine and then she told me her story and that she had just learned of this new metastasis and I was just shocked. I didn't know what to say.

GAIL: There's no skin cancer in either of our families so maybe just because of her fair skin and her red hair and increase the chance of getting melanoma. So that would apply to her. There's nothing she did or didn't do that would have explained it.

DR. ALYSSA VEST (Northwestern University Feinberg School of Medicine): Claire was so aware of her body. She was aware of her risk. I think sharing her story of someone who's so vigilant and pays such close attention to things and she still got this devastating diagnosis is a lesson to help teach others that if we're not aware, if we're not being vigilant, if we're not paying attention to our bodies, you know, we're at risk.

GAIL: She wanted to make a difference and that would be bringing awareness to if your skin -- if something looks wrong, go in and insist that they deal with it.

DR. SVETOMIR MARKOVIC (Oncologist/Hematologist Mayo Clinic): The one thing that keeps me going in the face of all of this is the hope that the answer exists, but we've simply not gotten there yet. In parallel to trying to provide care to my patients, part of my time is trying to provide the solution to the problem that we're dealing with.

DAVID: Claire was cancer free for two and a half years until December, the end of December of 2012. In fact, I think it was December 31, when the biopsy of what showed up on a scan turned out to be melanoma recurring in her left lung. But it was an isolated recurrence and it was fairly easy to excise surgically and that was done right away in early January of '13. So then, that resets the clock and you start over. So she had a scan in April that was clean. She had a scan in June or July that was clean. That was very exciting because that's just before she moved to Chicago to start medical school, and then she had a scan in October, which -- which was a mess.

DR. HEATHER HEIMAN: So certainly, Claire was a patient. She was a patient, and she respected her physicians. She was also a physician scientist to be herself.

DR. SVETOMIR MARKOVIC: And we were having scientific discussions about the method in which we would approach her care. She was giving me ideas and concepts, things I hadn't thought of that we actually did work in in the laboratory after I would see Claire in practice.

DR. HEATHER HEIMAN: You know, I can see how it's influenced her whole class. I could see a lot of people turning into a little bit better physicians because of knowing her.

DR. SVETOMIR MARKOVIC: She was much more a part of her care and much more a part of everything that we were trying to do than I think I would have been had I been in the same situation. And ultimately, we decided that we -- any additional treatment would only harm her and not benefit her at which point we decided not to push things any further.

DAVID: There's that figure of speech, well, if I get hit by a bus tomorrow -- and then you go on with whatever you're talking about. I don't start sentences with that anymore. We all know we could get hit by a bus tomorrow, but I can take steps to avoid it, like looking both ways. If I get hit by cancer tomorrow, it's not because I didn't look both ways.

DR. SVETOMIR MARKOVIC: I'll never forget. It was -- it was early in the morning. We had received a card from Claire. Claire, especially to the latter parts of her journey, as we started recognizing that the climb had become steeper, rather than me trying to comfort her, she was increasingly the one comforting me and our nurses, her family. And I think this letter, so close to her passing, was a testimonial to that. It was a beautiful letter, not something I will soon, or ever, forget.

VARIOUS PEOPLE READING THE LETTER: Dr. Dr. Markovic, I think it's clear that I am reaching the end of my road. I've always wondered what it's like for you to watch so many come and pass this way. You always have believed in me and my future. Despite the unbearable odds that have been against us, you fought on my behalf, advocated tirelessly for me, been a phone call away, seemingly day or night. You never seem jaded or depressed. It's as if none of your patients ever die. But, of course, lots do, including probably me. And that's okay. You gave me the gift of time, of months of life that I otherwise wouldn't have had. You've made me laugh in the face of death, and countless times, you gave my family and me hope when we had none. Our gratitude to you and the Mayo Clinic is beyond words. Keep on with the good work. You are an inspiration and a Godsend to your patients. Your favorite patient, Claire Richards.

*Melanoma is a life threatening skin cancer that can happen to anybody.*

*According to the National Cancer Institute there are more than 76,000 new cases of melanoma in the United States each year...and the numbers are climbing.*

*Nearly 10,000 people die of melanoma every year in the U.S.*

*Prevention and early detection are critical.*

*Risk factors for melanoma include:*

*High lifetime exposure to natural or artificial sunlight - tanning beds*

*Having fair skin that burns easily*

*History of blistering sunburns - particularly at a young age*

*Many common moles*

*Personal family history of melanoma*

*To learn more about prevention and detection please visit [www.mayoclinic.org](http://www.mayoclinic.org)*

*To make a donation to melanoma research in memory of Claire, please visit the Stay Out of the Sun Foundation: [www.sosrun.org](http://www.sosrun.org).*

*"It's my sincere hope that if more people are informed about melanoma, fewer people will die from it."*

*-Claire Richards, December 2013*