

Creativity and caring defined NDP senior, not the cancer that took her life

By Maria Wiering

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"Consider me well prepared," Claire Marie Wagonhurst wrote in her college admissions essay.

In less than 650 words, the 17-year-old chronicled the emotional and physical whirlwind of her melanoma diagnosis as a high school freshman and subsequent treatment, and the courage she mustered to "dig deep, find the strength and hang on."

"Cancer would not define me," she wrote. "Nope, this was merely a bump in my road; a detour perhaps, but nothing that would keep me from my goals."

Her essay must have struck a chord with college admissions officers. She received acceptance letters this month from her top two choices: the University of Alabama and Georgia Southern University.

One letter came the day before she died. The other arrived shortly after.

Wagonhurst, a senior at Notre Dame Preparatory School in Towson, died Oct. 16 at her home in Lutherville.

In a letter that day to the NDP community, Headmistress and School Sister of Notre Dame Sister Patricia McCarron described Wagonhurst as a "joyous young woman" who was "energetic, talented, motivated and full of life."

"While we struggle with this loss, we find strength in knowing that Claire is sharing eternal life with Jesus in heaven," she wrote.

Wagonhurst began attending NDP in sixth grade; prior to that, she was as student at St. Joseph School in Cockeysville. At NDP, she ran cross country, played lacrosse and participated in the baking club. Her focus, however, was art. She was a member of the National Art Honor Society and participated for two years in Project Greenway, a fashion showcase of attire made from recycled materials.

Last year, she turned a white garbage bag into a draped dress, with a bodice constructed from a repurposed purse and candy wrappers, said her art teacher, Anne Walker.

Wagonhurst was "incredibly creative," Walker said. "Her art has always had a sunshine feel to it."

That hit home for Walker in a special way the night of Wagonhurst's funeral. She was grappling with how to grieve while walking near her home in northern Baltimore County, she said, when a full, vivid rainbow appeared on the horizon.

The colors were brilliant.

"I said (to myself), Claire is smiling," she said. "That's my little gift from her, in my mind."

Hair for Claire

Wagonhurst furthered her study of art in a summer program at the Savannah College of Art and Design after her sophomore year. She planned to study interior design in college, but also had an eye for fashion. Her favorite color was coral; she was insistent on the exact hue. For her, related shades of pink, peach or salmon were insufficient, friends said.

After Wagonhurst's death, friend and fellow NDP senior Samantha Stott bought 11 rolls of coral ribbon and cut them into lengths to hand out at school. Girls tied them in their hair – which, for many, had been considerably shortened. The day of Wagonhurst's death, students started cutting their hair – some six inches, others more than a foot – to donate to Beautiful Lengths, which Pantene sponsors, in memory of their classmate. The hair cutting was almost spontaneous, Stott said. It just happened; no one really organized it. Girls from other grades cut their hair, too. They called it "Hair for Claire."

Some didn't wait for a salon and chopped their tresses in the bathroom and senior lounge. As of Oct. 23, NDP had collected enough inches to scale a 16-story building. Wagonhurst's cancer treatments had caused her to lose her long blond hair, but that wasn't the main motivation for the hair-cutting movement, her friends said.

"It feels good to change something," said Nina Sessler, 17. With Stott, Sessler was in Wagonhurst's close circle of friends.

There was nothing Sessler could do now for Wagonhurst, she said, so she wanted to do something for someone else.

'She was the glue'

Wagonhurst's friends and teachers described her as a good listener, kind, quiet, humble and humorous, with sharp one-liners. She was the mediator when her friends argued, and was generous in loaning out clothes and accessories when she and friends dressed up for occasions. She once dreamed of opening a boutique called "Clarify." She taught friends to apply makeup without looking like they were wearing any.

She was "effortlessly beautiful," said her social studies teacher, Mary O'Hara, who gave a eulogy at her Oct. 21 funeral Mass at the Cathedral of Mary Our Queen in Homeland.

Wagonhurst knew how to make her own fun, O'Hara said. She loved to run out for

food or coffee, and would always volunteer to drive her friends. She took selfies with them at every McDonald's on York Road.

She was the "glue" that held her friends together, Stott said.

Attendees at Wagonhurst's funeral crammed into the cathedral, which seats 2,200. Rain was forecasted, but during the Mass, a sunbeam pierced a stained glass window, casting red and blue onto the NDP seniors. It struck O'Hara as "as the most beautiful scene."

The seniors wore their iconic NDP jumpers, but other attendees wore bright colors, as the request of her parents, Rocky Wagonhurst and Marianne Banister Wagonhurst, a former WBAL-TV anchor. Her sister, Hillary, a 2010 NDP graduate and student at Arizona State University, also gave a eulogy.

The NDP seniors acted as the honor guard, and the school's chamber choir sang at the liturgy. Teachers and administrators were extraordinary ministers of holy Communion.

Students from other Catholic and private schools, including Maryvale, Mercy High School, Loyola Blakefield and Calvert Hall, also attended the funeral, many dressed in school uniforms.

"Throughout her illness, Claire really inspired the girls around her to live through their challenges with the same kind of grace she did, with the same kind of strength, and to be kind," Walker said.

Defying definition

Even for close friends, Wagonhurst's admissions essay - printed in the funeral program - was the most candid insight they'd received into of their friend's battle with cancer.

"She was extremely private," Sessler said. "She didn't want it to define her."

Wagonhurst said as much in the essay.

"I didn't want to become one of 'those kids' who wear their disease like a cloak for all to see, evading all traditional teenaged experiences to hide in illness," she wrote. Her essay described the progression of her skin cancer: Hormonal changes during puberty caused a mole on her ankle to go "nuts." Following surgery and a year of treatment, she went into remission, but the cancer returned several times. By the summer of her senior year, she was hopeful that a newly approved drug would keep the cancer at bay.

Many of her classmates didn't know about her cancer diagnosis at all, until its final occurrence. She was only able to attend a few days of class this year, her friends said. They visited her at home and received e-mail updates from her mother.

Her family was always optimistic, O'Hara said, always looking forward with hope for Claire's future.

Sister Patricia expects NDP students - especially the 149 seniors - to remember

Wagonhurst at each milestone toward graduation, but, she said, it will be a presence - not an absence - that they'll note.

"She'll be part of all of those events," she said. "She was part of the community. She'll be part of it in a different way."

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