

'Zaching' continues to inspire, while founder in hospice care

By Maria Wiering

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It was one photo, somewhat grainy, of a teenager in a hospital bed, his cotton gown open at the chest, arms raised and fists clenched in a strongman pose.

His expression is pure determination.

It was January 2012 when Zachary Lederer's father took that photo of him. Zach had just come out of surgery to resect a brain tumor and hoped to encourage concerned friends and family. It was posted online and shared. Someone added, in reference to quarterback Tim Tebow's widely mimicked genuflecting pose, "Tebowing is out, Zaching is in."

Then it went viral.

In the weeks and months that followed, thousands of people - some who knew Lederer, some who didn't - posted photos of themselves in the same pose, showing their support for Lederer or their own indomitable spirit in the face of disease.

Now, two years later, "Zaching" is an icon for the fight against cancer - a fight that, for 20-year-old Lederer, may be nearing its end.

He is at home on hospice care. Zach's mother, Chris, is an accountant at their parish, Church of the Resurrection in Ellicott City.

His grandmother, Howard County Del. Elizabeth Bobo in the Maryland General Assembly, told the Catholic Review Jan. 17 that he was "resting peacefully" at home, but would not expound on his condition on record.

"There's a lot of beauty to it. He's setting the tone and the whole family is following his tone," she said.

Blessed life

Lederer was diagnosed with brain cancer at age 11. After treatment from Johns Hopkins neurosurgeon Dr. Ben Carson he went into remission. Doctors discovered the cancer again while he was a freshman at the University of Maryland, where he was studying broadcast journalism. A third tumor was detected in September 2012.

Lederer approached his diagnosis as an opportunity to spread love, rather than live in despair, his grandmother said. When he was diagnosed with brain cancer the second time, he wrote online: "Another opportunity to prove myself worthy of this blessed life," Bobo said.

"I have learned more from Zachary than any other human being in my life as to how to live my life," she said. "His conversations are so simple - they're profound, but

they're simple. There's no melodrama about it."

She added: "I think he has a very deep connection to what I call 'the source,' and what most people would probably call 'God.'"

Zaching photos are archived on a Facebook page and Tumblr blogging site. The Facebook page, Zaching Against Cancer, has nearly 6,500 likes. His story has attracted national media attention, including a feature on ESPN's "College GameDay" in March 2012. Lederer was student manager for the University of Maryland men's basketball team.

A strong man

Throughout his treatment, Lederer posted photos of himself in his signature strongman pose with young patients at Johns Hopkins.

Celebrities, athletes and public officials from Lil Wayne and Torrey Smith to Jay Leno and Gov. Martin J. O'Malley have joined the movement, sharing photos of their arms raised in support. Group shots include sports teams, pep rallies and friends partying. Local Catholics, including Father J. Kevin Farmer, pastor of St. John the Evangelist in Frederick, have been photographed Zaching.

Other photos look more like the one that launched the phenomenon - men, women and children in their hospital beds, holding a strongman pose. Some children Zaching, like Lederer, have brain cancer.

A photo posted Jan. 13 showed a woman Zaching in a hospital bed as she recovered from brain surgery. Identifying herself as Kristine Petersen, she wrote, "Zach's positive outlook helped me to be brave going into surgery. I'm about to run my first half marathon - in honor of kicking my tumor but now also for Zach!"

Lederer's sister Julia updates followers on his condition through Twitter. On Jan. 11, she posted that her brother's "vital signs are that of an athlete and he continues to exude love and affection to his family and friends. He is giving us another gift and teaching us about strength and endurance all the while supporting others."

The Lederers started the Zaching Against Cancer Fund, a nonprofit that supports cancer patients and their families. Zaching has inspired a T-shirt design - which raises money for the nonprofit - and even a song, available on iTunes.

Source of hope

Resurrection-St. Paul School posted a photo of the student body Zaching in January. The church community has been a source of support and encouragement for the Lederer family, said Ruth Puls, a friend of Chris Lederer who works for the Archdiocese of Baltimore.

So has the Zaching phenomenon.

"The whole Zaching thing has meant so much to the family," Puls said, "that people on vacation, or people at great events, or people in the normal run of life have taken time to pause to 'Zach,' yes, but to say in another way 'We're thinking about you,

we're praying about you.' To see other cancer patients Zaching - it's not just that they're Zaching, it's that they're saying, 'I have hope because of you.'"

Father Brian M. Rafferty, pastor of Our Lady of the Chesapeake in Lake Shore, is a longtime friend of the Lederer family. He called them "the paragon of how to accept real suffering."

"They're handling this in a way that just inspires," he added.

The Lederers did not respond to interview requests for this story.

As for Zaching, "It's like a fist-pump," Father Rafferty said. "It's a physical sign that we're all this together and we're going to fight like hell and we're going to win this thing because Jesus is with us."

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