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TOP STORY

## Becoming a nurse fulfills her mom's dying wish

By Monique Seleen, GSN Contributor

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Leigha Wolf, who begins her nursing career at Banner Gateway Medical Center in Gilbert this month, holds a photo of her late parents. Special to GSN

At 22, Leigha Wolf will begin her career as a registered nurse in the oncology unit at Banner Gateway Medical Center in Gilbert, fulfilling a wish that her mother had before she died of cancer nearly five years ago.

When Wolf was just 16, her mother, who worked as a respiratory therapist at Banner Gateway, was unexpectedly diagnosed with stage four esophageal cancer.

“I spent pretty much every day after school with her during her treatments, bringing my anatomy book with me,” said Wolf.

With many complications and side effects from the chemotherapy, Wolf’s mother was admitted to Banner Gateway on several occasions and treated in its oncology unit.

“I was always blown away at how kind the nurses were to my mom,” said Wolf. “They made such an impact on me while watching them care for her.”

It was during that time that Wolf said her mother began encouraging her to pursue a career in healthcare one day.

“She would talk to me about becoming a speech therapist or a nurse, something in the medical field,” said Wolf.

Before passing away in April 2016, she gifted Wolf with a book of 50 wishes – her hopes and dreams for her only daughter throughout her life.

Wish number 16 stated that she hoped her daughter would become a nurse.

After losing her mom days before her 18th birthday, Wolf managed to finish her senior year of high school and began looking forward to attending Arizona State University.

“I had plans to go to ASU, join a sorority, and start working toward my nursing degree,” said Wolf. “But I noticed my dad was struggling. He was having a hard time managing everything after losing my mom.”

She opted to attend Mesa Community College instead and live at home, intending to be support for her dad and two brothers.

Shortly after starting college, Wolf began working as a certified nursing assistant at Banner Gateway Medical Center.

“The only opening they had for a CNA was up on the fifth floor in the oncology unit,” said Wolf. “I was hesitant at first because I had too many memories of being there with my mom during her treatment and didn’t think I could work there.”

Reluctantly, Wolf accepted the position but said it ended up being for the best.

“It was actually really therapeutic for me,” she said. “A lot of the people I worked with knew my mom and it was nice to have that built-in support system.”

While finishing up her last semester of prerequisite courses before applying to the Maricopa Community College Nursing Program, Wolf’s life took another unexpected tragic turn.

“I remember I told my dad goodnight and that I loved him and went to bed,” Wolf recalled. “The next morning, I woke up hearing his alarm clock going off repeatedly. I went to check on him and he was unresponsive.”

Wolf said she ran to find her younger brother, the only other person in the house with her at the time as their older brother had just moved out two days prior.

“We called 9-1-1 and I started doing CPR,” said Wolf. Later that day, her father was pronounced dead at the hospital due to a suspected heart attack.

Less than two years after her mother’s passing, at just shy of 20 years old, Wolf was parentless.

“I felt very alone and overwhelmed,” she said. “My brothers and I had to figure out where to live, how to pay the bills, how we were going to eat. I was trying to be my own parent and be the parent for my younger brother.”

Wolf said she and her brothers ended up splitting in different directions. Her younger brother, who was only 17 at the time and in need of a legal guardian, went into the state custody system to live in a group home. She and her older brother lived with friends for the time being while they figured things out.

“I went and stayed with one of my childhood best friends for a while,” said Wolf. “I slept on an air mattress in her room because I didn’t want to be alone.”

A few months later, Michelle Fries, a coworker who Wolf said was practically a stranger at the time, reached out to her about a possible living situation.

“Michelle was looking for somewhere to live after her divorce and she knew about my situation and just messaged me on Facebook one day asking if I’d like to move in an apartment with her.”

Wolf said Fries was a godsend to her.

“She took on a motherly role. She was my shoulder to cry on, helped me financially, gave me a safe place to live, and helped me get things organized,” said Wolf. “We really created a bond. She is like a mom, sister, and friend to me.”

In the midst of all the changes and adjustments, Wolf still had school. Despite everything that had happened, she continued on with her classes, applied to the nursing program and was accepted.

“My friends really pushed me to get through it,” she said, adding; “I wanted to prove myself and make my parents proud.”

As a tribute to her parents and a reminder of her strength to get through the tough times, Wolf got a tattoo on her arm: a bouquet of flowers – the same one printed on the front of both her parents’ funeral programs – and the word “resilient” running through the middle of the bouquet.

“I wanted something to remind me that I can get through anything,” she said.

Looking back, Wolf said navigating nursing school, clinical rotations and working full-time all without her parents there for support was not easy. She attributes her success to her positive attitude and determination.

“Because of my experiences, I got to see how I could grow as a person,” she said. “Had these things not happened, I wouldn’t have the knowledge and strength to get through hard times.”

Wolf will begin her first shift as an Oncology Nurse on Feb. 22 and said she is looking forward to connecting with her patients on a personal level.

“Having been on both sides of it, I have a profound sense of empathy. A cancer diagnosis is scary, and I can put myself in the position of the patients and the family members,” she said, adding: “I hope I can have a positive impact where people can remember the way I made them feel.”