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Hope amidst Trauma

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In a world full of sad stories and unhappy endings, every once in a while a tale of strength and achievement emerges.

Christian San Juan was never a straight “A” student, he never became captain of his football team and he never was elected class president. In fact, you will never hear him boast about any of his achievements. In his room you won’t even find a single trophy or a ribbon.

But like many, Christian’s achievements aren’t as apparent and visible as the awards that are given to those who excel and exceed beyond their capacity.

Working full time and going to school, this student’s success story is one of hope. It serves as beacon for children who suffer or have suffered from childhood trauma and stress caused by the presence and encounter of parental illness in the home.

In June of 1993 Venicio San Juan was diagnosed with cancer. His wife Marie-Fe was given the sole task of caring for both her husband and her young child. Recalling their living in that situation, “My mom did an amazing job in raising me.” San Juan said, “I never felt neglected.”

This response is not typical of anyone suffering from the traumatic loss and fearful experiences of having an ill parent.

T. Atilla Caranoglu, researcher of the Child and Adolescent Psychiatry Service in Boston, Massachusetts, stated that children who experience a parent's illness or critical condition are at risk for developing psychiatric problems.

"A child will do anything for his or her mother's attention," said, Aranye Fradenburg, Professor at the University of California - Santa Barbara, "When a child does not gain that attention he or she compensates through different avenues."

Fradenburg, who specializes in child psychoanalysis, said that childhood is key in human development. A child depends on his or her parents for their survival. When a child doesn't get what he or she wants they have a fear of death. They literally think they will die if they don't get their parent's approval and attention.

In correlation, when a child is denied such attention they compensate and by doing so, may result in mental stress and may even result in mental disorder according to Caranoglu's study.

This response to intense overwhelming physical or psychological trauma manifest by fear, helplessness, or horror affects children and adults who experience a catastrophic life event or who witness a serious threat of harm to a friend or family member.

Being only 7 years old, San Juan recalls gaining help from many family and friends. "When my dad was diagnosed with cancer I didn't understand everything fully," San Juan said. "I just knew that he was sick and seeing the machines that he was hooked on was scary."

According to Caranoglu's report, children who become part of the recovery process and receive detailed information of their parent's medical procedures develop frequent recurring and

intrusive recollections of their parent's care. Recollections of traumatic events cause sleep deprivation and potentially may become a physical or a mental threat to a child.

"I always thought about the medical attention he was getting and it scared me," San Juan said. "And I didn't really want to fully understand what was going on because I didn't want to hear the answer."

Researchers found that children who ask a lot of questions and focus on their parent's illness rather than on their own age-appropriate activities have a higher risk of developing psychiatric disorders.

In the summer of his father's diagnosis San Juan found himself struggling to cope with the lack of his presence. Rather than fall prey to depression, anxiety and seclusion, San Juan managed to continue with his life as an independent young man.

"I feel like I matured at such a young age," San Juan recalls. "I was able to deal with things. I was definitely in a different maturity level than most of my friends.

Looking back on his childhood, San Juan recalls that he was resentful when it came to father and son activities. "I always felt bad when all my cousins or my friends were with their fathers when I didn't have one."

As the stalwart mature child, San Juan found himself looking to be part of more activities. He joined the Boy Scouts of America, he became a varsity football player and focused on taking care of his mother.

When asked as to what helped him the most in his recovery and coping of the situation he smiled and said, "I don't want to seem over-religious, but it was my faith that pulled me through."

Christian San Juan of Los Angeles, California is a walking miracle and a true success story.

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