

Melissa Parrelli
Narrative: Colette Coyne

My time is limited
So none of it waste
Come close to me now,
In all of your haste
Like all things I must go,
But if you are wise, this you should know...
In all those you meet, in all that you see,
Look hard and search...
There will be me!

Colette Coyne wrote this poem several years before being diagnosed with malignant melanoma. She had no idea that it would take her life at 30 years old.

She died just under six months after a diagnosis that came as a shock to her and her loved ones. As her close-knit family rallied around her, they struggled with questions: How did this happen to the health-conscious, independent young woman who had so many dreams? How were the signs missed? What could anyone have done to prevent this? What now? When the stark reality of her disease overtook her, Colette Coyne faced the darkest question of all: How do you prepare yourself and loved ones for an end that comes too soon?

More than 10 years after her death, The Skin Cancer Foundation reports that the incidence of melanoma continues to rise at a faster rate (45 percent between 1992-2004) than the seven most common cancers. For 25 to 29-year-olds, melanoma is the most common form of cancer, and if you encompass 15 to 29-year-olds, it is the second most common. According to the American Academy of Dermatology, in 2010, just under 115,000 individuals were diagnosed with melanoma, 8,700 of which were terminal cases.

Coyne's family continues the battle of educating the public about the risks of skin cancer with their Collete Coyne Melanoma Awareness Campaign. Despite their efforts, however, nothing can bring their youngest one back.

--Colette's story--

Colette Marie Coyne was born on October 10, 1968 to three older brothers - Patrick, Thomas and Edward, and one older sister Mary - all a little less than two years apart.

After Mary, the fourth child, the mother of the Long Island-based Irish-Catholic clan wanted a break, but not a permanent one.

“Five years later I started to miss having a little one around,” Coyne said. “When Colette came, the kids used to say, ‘She’s spoiled, she’s spoiled. She gets to do everything!’ I said, ‘You know why? Because being strict with you didn’t do anything.’”

The Coynes raised a tight-knit family, yet with their democratic parenting style, the five children developed into fiercely independent individuals, especially Colette due to the age gap.

Colette was mature at a young age, and her genuine compassion for others dated back to middle school. Coyne remembers the time her daughter came home from school upset with the teacher after the class submitted essays for an assignment. A classmate of hers - who hadn’t written well in the past - did a good job one day, and the teacher questioned if someone had helped the girl compose her essay.

“Colette was very indignant that day,” Coyne said. “So she went up and told the teacher that he not only was accusing the girl of dishonesty, but he was in fact saying that she couldn’t do better, which was wrong. So the teacher said, ‘I’m not used to having a 12-year-old tell me off.’”

But that’s the type of person Colette was, her family says, a good friend and caring person.

After graduating high school early, the 17-year-old moved to Belfast, Ireland to volunteer at a mental health clinic. She lived there on her own for a few months and then realized she missed her family.

The day Colette came home she stood in the doorway with her shoulder length, auburn hair all teased out. A black leather skirt barely touched her knees, a black jacket covered her torso, and a brand new ring sparkled... in her nose.

“When I opened the door I was shocked,” Coyne said. “You know she was just full of the devil. She had done it to get a rise out of me to see what our reaction would be.”

Mr. and Mrs. Coyne wanted the kids to make their own choices. After contemplating enrollment at Queens College, Colette ended up choosing the University of Wisconsin, where she was set on being a nutritionist. She ended up graduating with a double major in communications and women’s studies.

“She was a very independent young woman,” Coyne said. “So I knew the best thing was for her to decide things herself.”

After a year of trying to break into the production market out in Los Angeles, Colette decided to pursue her dreams back in New York.

When she turned 22, she had part of a mole removed on her shoulder because she thought it looked a bit odd. The fair-skinned redhead and her doctors thought nothing of the mark since it was from birth, so she continued to focus on work. Colette held various jobs over the next few years as an independent contractor on music videos and advertising.

In 1994, Colette landed a job in a production coordinating role with the United States of Poetry project - an award winning PBS TV series.

Colette worked for Anne Mullen, a co-producer on the project, and the two became good friends.

“She was this little quiet girl in the corner who really wanted to work with us,” Mullen said. “She was determined to come on the road with this expensive project. She was an assistant and we didn’t know her value at first, but clearly she proved her value through her hard work and commitment. Then we needed her on the road. She was the rock.”

One day - before the production began traveling - Colette pulled her sleeve down over her shoulder, showing Anne the partial mole that remained from the surgery three years prior. Colette noticed a change, and Mullen agreed that it looked abnormal. Mullen then referred Colette to her dermatologist.

“The crazy thing is that she’d been going to dermatologists in Manhattan for years - some of them names you would recognize - yet *she* brought it to the doctor’s attention,” Coyne said.

Colette went to the recommended dermatologist who then said she needed surgery to remove the rest of the mole - extensive surgery on her shoulder.

“I remember she casually said to me one day, ‘Oh mom I’m going to have surgery tomorrow to remove this mole.’ And I said, ‘Oh can I go?’ You know because she’s very independent.”

The operation left her with a three-inch scar on her shoulder in which a plastic surgeon considered grafting from her stomach to close it. Colette chose not to do the plastic surgery because it required a longer recovery period.

“The last thing she wanted to do was a recovery that would prevent her from coming on the road with us,” Mullen said. “She said, ‘Anne I don’t care if it’s going to be a funny scar, I don’t care. I want to get on the road.’ ”

The biopsy revealed Congenital Nevi, a benign growth from birth with only a one percent chance of melanoma.

So Colette traveled the country with the poetry gig with a clear mind and began to move up in the production chain with various jobs. She often worked 12-hour days.

“That’s what she loved, and she could do it,” Coyne said. “Colette said to me one day, ‘Mom do you realize that I don’t date?’ and I said, ‘When would you have time?’ ”

She had no idea that her time would be cut even shorter.

Coyne said over the course of the next few years, Colette was seen regularly by dermatologists to treat her acne, but body scans to check her scar or other moles were never done.

In April of 1998, four years after the extensive shoulder surgery, Colette felt soreness under her arm. She thought she might have pulled a muscle at work while on a shoot, but her gut told her something different.

After a few days with the pain, Colette called her gynecologist since she was due for an annual check up.

Coyne recalls, “The GYN said, ‘Oh don’t worry about that, it’s a pulled muscle’...in spite of the scar on her shoulder. I remember Colette came home saying, ‘Mom the doctor thinks I’m paranoid. I insisted that she send me for a sonogram.’ ”

The sonogram revealed four tumors. During the week, the masses were biopsied, and on Friday around quarter to 4 p.m., Coyne got the call that she was never expecting.

“Mom, I have cancer,” Colette said. She told her mother that she couldn’t wait for an office visit and received the biopsy results over the phone. The cancer was either lymphoma, breast cancer or melanoma.

Coyne and her daughter frantically called friends and family, anyone they knew who worked in hospitals to get last minute appointments. A breast surgeon was scheduled for Monday, but by then, Colette already had the results. She had melanoma.

To detect melanoma, the American Academy of Dermatology suggests people to do a self skin exam and look for the ABCDEs in moles - Asymmetry, Border (irregular ones), Color (moles of various pigments), Diameter (greater than 6mm), Evolving (changes size, shape or color). If caught early, melanoma has nearly a 100 percent cure rate, but unfortunately, as in Colette’s case, not all patients are that lucky.

Colette was supposed to start a new, exciting chapter in her life after leasing an apartment on Central Park West. However, the day she was slated to move in, she instead sat in a doctor’s office, receiving what would essentially be the basis for the final chapter of her life.

“She came out and she was ash,” Coyne said. “She said, ‘Mom, it’s melanoma.’ Honestly, I had no idea how deadly it was. You’re like, okay it’s melanoma. You’re kind of in shock, but you’re alright.”

The Coyne family quickly learned how serious the diagnosis was. Thanks to her own leg work, Colette had her cousin - who worked at Memorial Sloan Kettering - secure her an appointment the next day with a well-known surgeon at one of the nation’s best cancer treatment centers.

The doctor said the disease was inoperable.

She did two outpatient treatments “which were a waste of time” and proceeded with “horrendous” clinical trials of chemo therapy Coyne said. Colette was in the hospital for five days straight, and a family member was with her at every moment, even her brother who commuted from Missouri.

“We were fighting [in a good way] over who was going to sleep in her room,” her sister Mary said. “We argued over who was going to appointments with her. It was like we were kids.”

Colette came home, soon experiencing the after effects of the treatment.

“No wonder they don’t tell you there’s three or four rounds you had to go through because the side effects were horrendous,” Coyne said. “Hallucinations, dehydration, internal pain. At one point she actually collapsed.”

Colette’s main concern at the time was that she wasn’t going to be well enough to go back for the second round because she was so weakened. But she did go back.

“That second round just did her in,” Coyne explained. “But she never once said, ‘Why me?’ Just kept going through what had to be done. She didn’t want anyone feeling sorry for her.”

Matters completely consumed Colette when her hair started falling out.

“I remember that day, it was very emotional,” Coyne said with tears running down her own cheeks. “Colette said, ‘Mom, I don’t think I’ve had a day in my life where somebody hasn’t said, ‘Oh you have lovely hair.’ You know? And now it’s gone.’ ”

Three months following her initial diagnosis, there was false hope when the tumors began to dissipate.

But despite the clinical trials, the cancer had already metastasized, spreading to her brain, bones, liver and lungs.

“The doctor was trying to waltz around telling her,” Coyne said. “But she looked up at him with her auburn wig and with her makeup - looking great, because that’s the way she was - and she said, ‘Are you telling me I’m terminal?’ And he said ‘yes.’ ”

Doctors said Colette had three to six months to live, so the Coyne family made their minds up to make the most of every day. She only told immediate family and a few close friends that she was dying.

Shock and devastation intoxicated the household, yet there was no denial or fear on Colette’s part. In her own way, she began to prepare.

The weekend after she heard the devastating news, the family went out to their second home in Hampton Bays. Coyne called her friend, Emmet, who was a priest, and told him the situation. He set a time to come over.

“Colette said, ‘Mom, when Emmet comes, I think we should meet with him as a family,’ ” Coyne recalled. “She said, ‘Because when I die I’m going to be fine, but you’re all going to be in trouble.’ ”

Some days she was sicker than others, often bogged down by a morphine drip and utter exhaustion. She was too sick to work, but nobody at her current job at Long Island Cable Vision had any idea of the underlying truth beneath Colette’s courageous smile.

One day Colette was upstairs typing up her last wishes when the phone rang. She picked it up during the voice mail, so her mother overheard the whole conversation on the speakerphone. It was between Colette and her male colleague regarding the opening of a new office in the city.

Coyne remembers: “I heard him say, ‘I am going to go back to Long Island, but I’m staying here in Manhattan until you come back because this job is yours.’ And she said, ‘No Tom, don’t wait for me to come back. I’m never coming back.’ ”

That was one of the first times Coyne saw her daughter break down.

“We had many long talks about life, about our relationship, how lucky we were to have one another as sisters,” said Mary Coyne, Colette’s older sister. “It was a horrific time, but we always shared laughter. Once she said to me, ‘There are no problems between us, no regrets.’ In a way she was preparing me for after she was gone.”

Mary helped her baby sister get dressed and tucked her in at night after some days of laying in bed together watching TV. The girls went shopping because two of Colette’s friends were getting married at the end of August. Colette was determined to attend.

Mullen was one of the friends getting married, and she did not expect Colette to make it.

“I called her mother and she said, ‘Anne, Colette plans on coming,’ ” Mullen said. “You could have blown me over with a feather because I knew how sick she was.”

Colette’s brother, Thomas, was her escort, but she made it clear that his main job was to make sure her hat didn’t come off.

“That was my job,” he said. “To go to the wedding and make sure her hat didn’t get bumped off or fall off because she had a wig on, and it would come off with the hat.”

The hardest part of the day - for Thomas at least - was when Colette was saying goodbye to everyone in the parking lot.

“She was giving people hugs saying, ‘Oh it was great seeing you.’ And I’m standing there going, this is the last time she’s going to see these people, and I’m wondering if they have any idea about it themselves.”

Colette and Thomas, who are 10 years apart, developed a special connection when they were adults. She’d often open up and talk to him during her worst moments.

In September, the two were at a beach house Colette had rented in the Hamptons for her friend’s birthday. The siblings were sitting on the beach and saw young girls riding around on jet skis when tears started rolling down Colette’s pale cheeks.

“You don’t want to just sit there all the time and be an idiot not knowing what she’s crying about,” Thomas said. “So I said, ‘What is it in particular, that’s upsetting you now?’ She just kind of looked at me and said, ‘That’s supposed to be my life.’ ”

Her birthday was October 10, and instead of celebrating the life she hoped to live in her 30s, Colette was planning her own funeral.

The situation wasn’t any easier for her family, especially when shopping for her birthday gift.

“I’m looking through the store, and I’m like, what do you get your sister when she’s about to die?” Thomas said. “You don’t want to get something that implies longevity. You don’t want to get something that says, ‘Hey you’re dying, this is good for five days.’ It was just weird to have those kinds of thoughts.”

The best gift was love. Colette arranged for the whole family to travel in an RV up to Cape Cod for the weekend. As fate would have it though, the overwhelming pain that Colette endured was too much for her to handle.

“We just got there, and she said ‘I need to go home,’ ” Coyne explained. “And she said to my husband, ‘Daddy I’m dying.’ He said, ‘Well there will be a miracle.’ ”

Patrick had a difficult time facing the fact that he'd be burying his own child. A few days later, Colette called her father to her bedside because she was worried about him.

Coyne remembers her daughter looking her husband straight in the eye, unleashing his tears. Colette said, "Dad you have to face that I am dying. There is going to be no miracle."

On the night of Oct. 27, only five and a half months from her initial diagnosis, Colette passed away at home, literally in the arms of her family.

"It looked as if she was about to get sick, so I just lifted her up," Coyne said. "She just looked ahead, and I literally saw her spirit leave her."

As though the profound memory of her life was not enough, Colette did not leave her close friends and family without parting gifts. She gave three of her friends in financial need \$5,000 each. She bought her brothers rings and her sister a butterfly necklace.

"I said this butterfly will represent her metamorphosis into a new life," Mary said. "Colette liked that."

Colette's suffering came to an end, but for family and friends, the pain was just beginning.

It's hard for the family to look back and recall that Colette was never a sun worshipper. Only once when she was seven, did Colette get a severe burn.

"There wasn't a lot of talk of sunscreen in the 70s," Coyne said. "We were in Florida and she wore a T-shirt in the water. I thought it'd protect her, now I know it doesn't. She got a bad burn, on the same shoulder where the melanoma later formed."

Colette's story elicits the question of whether doctors misdiagnosed her during after her second surgery. Coyne said other medical professionals looked at Colette's slides to determine if something was missed. The conclusion was that Colette had a rare case of regressed melanoma in which something occurs in your skin, but the immune system fights it. It dissipates, but kicks off a malignant cell, so the cell remains in the body, and in Colette's case, traveled through her system undetected.

"It doesn't matter now," Coyne said. "I accepted this was her destiny."

Colette had an unusual case, but the family believes that regular body screenings by dermatologists at check ups could have caught the malignant mole at an earlier stage.

"The good thing is that there is much more awareness out there now than there was 20 years ago, even twelve years ago when Colette died," Coyne said. "We try to extend that awareness with our foundation and teach people the simple steps they can take to minimize the risks of getting skin cancer."

Thomas added, "The real tragedy of a death is not the loss of life itself as much as it is that nothing changes as a result of it."

In 1998, the family started the Colette Coyne Melanoma Awareness Campaign, which hopes to save lives by telling the story of a young woman who didn't get to finish hers. Friends and family continue to feel Colette's loss of the life that had yet to come for her.

"Not yet having met the love of her life, not yet having that level of intimacy with another person, not having a child," Mullen said. "She was just starting to bloom."

A flower in bloom was a fit symbol for Colette's departure. She requested her wake be a closed casket, blanketed in a sea sunflowers.

On one of Colette's birthdays soon after she passed, Coyne decided to go to church.

"I pulled up and got out of the car," she said. "And on the ground right in front of me was a sunflower. I feel her with me all the time."