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Courageous Feliz

By TABITHA JULES CARIAGA

There was sickness, there was death — but there was also life. It is in the latter that Feliz Lucas, the mother of the girl the world came to know as “Courageous Caitie,” found the strength to move forward.

“I have to make grief my friend,” Feliz says, trying to hold back her tears as she talked about coping with loss.

It has been a year since her daughter (Caitlin Soleil Lucas, who became known on social media as “Courageous Caitie”) passed away. Caitie was only three-years-old when she was diagnosed with juvenile myelomonocytic leukemia, a rare kind of cancer in the blood. Only one in a million children below the age of four is affected by this disease. Thousands of people followed her journey, offering prayers and donations for Caitie to get well.

But on March 31, 2016, the little angel breathed her last. Her body died, but her story lived on in the hearts of those she inspired, especially in that of

the person who held her hand through it all — her mother.

At first, Feliz thought that she would lose her mind. It didn't make sense to her. She tried to find comfort by talking to people who went through the same experience of losing a child. Much to her disappointment, most of them said that it was never going to be better. She then looked for a grief counselor who made her understand that it was normal to feel that way.

With a smile

Filipinos are known to be naturally cheerful, which is also one of the reasons why Caitie's story was widely followed; she was able to smile through all the pain she was going through. The downside for Feliz was how grief also makes the same cheerful people rather uncomfortable.

Photography by JAR CONCENGCO / Makeup by CARMIE LOCSIN
Hair by RUEL PAPA



Feliz holds an artwork of Caitie that one of her supporters sent to them as a sign of support

“
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”



"Grief is taboo. It happens almost everywhere. *Ang daming namamatay* (Many people die). People are grieving, but people keep saying 'You just accept that she's in a better place, you should be happy for the person, she's okay now, she won't have to go through pain.' However, you have to understand that a person still has to go through grief."

"My grief will always be there, so I have to make it my friend. So that when it would come and visit me, I need to find the good in it. I would cry but move forward, allow it to transform me, instead of fighting it," says Feliz.

This, however, was not easy, especially for her marriage. Feliz admits that she tried to push people away to escape her pain. She even packed her belongings and left the home she shared with her husband Jayjay, Caitie and their son Ethan.

It wasn't until her husband pursued her that she remembered she was not alone. "It's a big factor when you don't give up on your commitment when you say, 'I do,'" says Feliz of Jayjay, who would then hug her and tell her, "I am not your enemy."

Eventually, Feliz also had to keep in mind that Caitie was not their only child. Since it was common for those who have lost a sibling to feel unimportant due to their parents' mourning, Feliz made sure to involve Ethan in her grieving process as well.

Sometimes, she would cry in her room, and Ethan would go up to her, embrace her and give her some tissue. "I don't try to hide my pain from him. I tell him how helpful he is," she says.

Besides all the love and support from the people around her, what really helped Feliz make peace with her grief was a beautiful vision she had in a dream. "The time will come when I will see my daughter in heaven. I will embrace her, and I will experience everything that we missed out on as mother and daughter, in a flash," she describes.

Tears roll down our cheeks as she explains that the most painful part of losing Caitie was missing out on all the experiences that they could have had together. "I'm going to grow old, but I won't be able to do it with her. Maybe someday, that vision will come true, and then I will realize that, it won't matter. Missing out doesn't matter."

Her faith was also tested by these events. She recalled trying to haggle with God for Caitie to live, but in the end, realized that He only wants the best for her child. "If Jesus can love my child more than I can, then rest assured Jesus wants the best, more than the best that I could give. I just have to trust," she narrates.

Ray of hope

The story of "Courageous Caitie" wasn't just Caitie's story. In the same light, it wasn't just their family's story either. "I think each person saw something in our story that is similar to their own. That's the story of hope," says Feliz.

When their story spread all over the Internet, people from all around the globe helped them through donations and prayers. Even when her daughter passed, well-wishers from Singapore (where Caitie had the last of her cancer treatments) came together to organize a wake for Caitie, sharing their prayers, songs and stories with the Lucas family.

Even until now, Feliz is still amazed by the overwhelming support that her family had gotten from these virtual strangers. "Imagine the potential for goodness when people just think less of themselves. The potential for goodness can be stronger than selfishness. It's not just about Caitie's battle with sickness. It's not just about her battle with death, or our family's response to her death.

"Our journey is really just a reflection of everyone's personal journey; that you don't have to fake everything and show everyone

that you're doing okay. It is about being authentic with your weaknesses but not choosing to stay in that position; the potential to change, the potential to choose less of myself."

Her experience with Caitie made her realize the need for stronger family foundations. She remembers stories from the hospital where a lot of children had estranged parents. People also messaged them to share their experiences about how the story of "Courageous Caitie" has inspired them to become better parents.

These words also encouraged her to branch out as a person. From being a stylist for weddings, she and her husband have now ventured into family photography.

The Lucas couple started Little Heartbeat, a company that helps families capture happy moments. Having shared a strong bond with Caitie, Feliz can easily tell when a parent is not involved with their kid, so she makes sure to give parents and their children opportunities to play in front of the cameras. ■

Life begins anew



Jayjay with son Ethan and baby Calea

These days, Feliz and her family have moved forward with a newborn they named Calea. Her birth was a miraculous reminder.

Feliz and her husband had a bittersweet euphoria when they realized that she was scheduled for delivery on March 5 (the same day they found out that Caitie had leukemia a few years back).

Calea however, proved to be a Valentine's blessing. She was born last Feb. 14 at 11:25 a.m. (the same time that Caitie passed away as Jayjay recalls).

Feliz clarifies, "People would say, 'it's reincarnation,' but no, it's not that. It's more of God being able to create new meaning to the pain."

Their family went through a lot the past year but it only made their bond stronger. While "Courageous Caitie" gave hope to many, it was Feliz and her family who changed at the end of her journey. "It made me selfless, and enjoy being selfless," Feliz concludes.