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## My beloved wife, Eleni

By [JohnVavas](#) | Posted December 31, 2014 | New York

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Location  
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### Assignment



This iReport is part of an assignment:  
[Those we lost in 2014](#)

My son's second birthday was unforgettable. Unfortunately, it wasn't for the reasons you might think. My wife, Eleni Vavas, was diagnosed with Stage III adenocarcinoma when Zachary turned two on November 13, 2012.

Eleni was an accomplished cardiologist and was quite in tune with her body and health. When her persistent gastritis wouldn't go away, she asked her friend, a GI doctor, to scope her.

I will never forget the look on his face when he ushered me into a side room to tell me that he found a tumor and didn't know how to tell her the news. My heart sunk. I had no idea what to expect. Some say that ignorance is bliss, but Eleni didn't have that luxury. As a medical professional, she knew exactly what to expect, she knew what was to come—and just how bad the diagnosis was.

Eleni received all of her treatment at Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center. She endured chemotherapy, surgery, more chemotherapy and radiation over an eight-month period. When she finished her treatment in July of 2013, we

began to live our lives with a sense of “new normal.”

We had been through an extremely tough time and saw life for what it is: fragile and beautiful. Eleni began to keep a journal about all of the beautiful things she experienced in the world. She saw the good in people and learned to not sweat the small stuff. For anyone who knew Eleni, this was a drastic shift for someone who excelled in EVERYTHING she did, and was determined to be perfect at everything.

In January 2014, when Eleni kept vomiting and couldn't keep food down, we both knew something was terribly wrong. Our worst fears were confirmed following a biopsy that revealed the cancer had returned and no longer was confined to the stomach. The term “palliative chemo” brought me to my knees.

Throughout all of this, Eleni's faith and courage grew stronger. As the odds kept stacking up against us, she continued to march on and bravely fight.

Even while weakened by chemo and struggling to get out of bed, Eleni mustered the strength to come to Cycle for Survival at Equinox in February. All of the money raised funds research for rare cancers at Memorial Sloan Kettering. Our friends and family donated and joined our team as a show of support for Eleni.

At the event, she spoke to the crowd and shared her story. She opened up about her struggles and her perspective on life, cancer and living with this disease. Her words still echo, “It is unacceptable for there not to be a cure for this disease. This is a disease that doesn't discriminate. It didn't care that I am a mother, a wife, a daughter. It didn't care that I am a doctor, who dedicated my life to saving others.”

A few months later, my beloved wife passed away at age 37 following 18 months battling gastric cancer.

I was shocked to discover that many of the people in the room at Cycle for Survival who heard Eleni speak had found her on Facebook and began friendships with her. I will never forget the feeling of gratitude and the outpouring of condolences from those people. The Cycle for Survival family is a truly unique and special group. I will return to Cycle for Survival in 2015 with my son to honor Eleni and continue to fight in her memory.

Having never had someone close to me deal with a cancer diagnosis, I didn't realize just how truly helpless you feel. This disease is like no other. A treatment plan is just that—a plan, not a solution. And for rare cancer patients, there are sometimes no good plans, even with the best care. The solution is through research. No one should ever have to hear the phrase: “There are no treatment options left.”

She left us far too soon, but Eleni taught everyone to face challenges with strength and grace, and to appreciate the beauty and wonder in life every day.

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