

Thoughts on Lisa

By Kristin O'Keefe

Lisa Flaxman of Chevy Chase, who died from cancer in January at age 43, was a writer, singer, entrepreneur, activist and philanthropist, as well as a wife and a mother of three. The founder of musiKids in Bethesda, Lisa was also a tireless advocate and guardian angel for other cancer patients. She started a nonprofit organization that brings music to patients at Lombardi Comprehensive Cancer Center at Georgetown University Hospital. She also was the author of *Glances at Time: A Young Mother's Journey With Breast Cancer*, a collection of poetry published in 2008, and she assembled an anthology of writings by Georgetown Hospital patients titled "Lombardi Voices." The following is an essay about Lisa by a writer she inspired. It is followed by Lisa's entry into the 2008 Bethesda Literary Festival essay contest.



COURTESY FLAXMAN FAMILY

I met Lisa—really met her—at the 2008 Bethesda Literary Festival. I'd entered an essay contest, and, along with 11 other finalists, had been invited to read my work.

It was a big night for me. I'd spent the previous year trying to write children's fiction. The result was several manuscripts but no publishing contracts, so the essay contest was just the ego boost I needed. My family joined me at the reading for moral support (and so I could show there was more to Mommy than laundry). But when I entered the room, I had a moment of doubt—it was a largely adult audience; my young children were the only kids there.

Then Lisa came in with her wide smile, funky shoes and three youngsters in tow. I'd seen her before at PTA events, the pool, working the treadmill at the gym. We'd never had a real conversation, but that night it was good to see her familiar face. We smiled, made all the connections. Then, the real bonding moment arrived:

"Are you a writer?"

"Me too!"

We had much in common—the activities that consume typical suburban families and now this other gem we shared,

this common thread: our writing. We whispered and giggled as other contestants were called up to read their essays. Then, we had our turns. My essay was about a magical day spent with my son—a cold, dreary day at the park, just the two of us. Despite the grayness, I had surrendered to my son's imagination and become a bird, a firefighter; together we had watched bears fishing, dolphins swimming—all at a little neighborhood park in the shadows of the Kensington Safeway. That day, in part, inspired me to quit my job and embrace this time with my children, when afternoons stretch long and there are adventures to be had. And maybe, to rediscover that part of myself in which the imagination lay buried, to draw it out and create children's literature.

As for Lisa's essay, it, too, had a mother and child element. It began with Lisa and her daughter, Sophie, out for a special mother-daughter lunch. Lisa spotted a woman sitting alone at the restaurant, wearing a turban and knitting something "spectacular and golden." She guessed that the woman likely had cancer, but wondered whether to leave the woman alone with her knitting or send some signal of support. Lisa, being Lisa, went to the woman. She made a con-

nection. Lisa's essay was powerful and beautiful, and it made me cry; it was clearly the best entry, but when the winners were announced, neither of us made the cut. We turned to each other at the same time and said, "Yours should have won." We agreed that the male judges sank our chances.

No one was ready for the night to end. The kids had been relatively well behaved; ice cream at Gifford's called. Lisa and I talked and talked as kids clamored and ice cream dripped. She told me she'd self-published a book of essays and poetry about her battle with cancer. She told me about her writer's circle with local published authors. She told me I could write and that she was going to connect me to someone she knew in children's literature. I can't remember what I told her, I just basked in the glow that was Lisa.

She called me a week later to invite me to coffee with a local children's author. She offered to read my work. I gave her a single-spaced manuscript of 60-plus pages, and she read it in one day. She left me a long, heartfelt message about my book, about what she loved and about what edits I might make. She told me my work made her day.

That phone call made my day. My writ-

ing year, in fact. I felt like a giddy teen, replaying Lisa's message three times, a dopey smile on my face. I called her back a few days later, brimming with ideas to run by her.

I didn't hear back. The nagging headaches Lisa had mentioned were the result of a brain tumor. The cancer was back and spreading viciously. That was May. Surgeries and hospital stays and long bouts of chemo followed.

I joined the Listserv that gave updates and meal plans for Lisa's family. I tried to think of the best, most thoughtful food for Lisa. I dropped off the veggie pad thai that she wrote about in her essay, the dish that she had shared with her daughter, Sophie. I sent articles about writing, suggestions for new essays. I even practiced conversations about writing and about light, witty things. But Lisa was resting a lot, and I only saw her once in the months that followed.

I read her book, and knew *she* was the real writer.

I saved her answering machine message and replayed it periodically, until I thought it was time to delete it, that holding on to it might somehow be jinxing her.

Lisa died anyway, on Jan. 14. She was only in her early 40s and left behind a husband, three children, a loving extended family and enough friends to fill a stadium.

I think about Lisa, and I think about connectedness, about how, after all our overlapping circles, we were finally brought together by our shared love of writing. I think about how she took on the role of my fairy godmother, encouraging, introducing, reading, editing.

I think about how I am on the periphery of people touched by Lisa, about how we only met a few times. I try to think about how her longtime friends must feel, and I cannot imagine. I think of all of the Lisa connections in my neighborhood, at my children's school and about how so many of the good people I know were her friends.

I wish what all her good friends wish: that I could have been *her* fairy god-

mother, the one who halted the cancer with a wave of a wand and a cup of tea.

I think how easy it is to say "no more"—to have enough friends, enough to do. And then, I think of Lisa, who couldn't stop connecting, even when there couldn't possibly have been more room. Lisa always had time for her family, her friends, but also for a woman knitting in a restaurant, for an acquaintance at an essay reading, and we all flocked to her, because she helped us to see our best selves.

In the essay she read last spring, Lisa said she herself was too impatient for knitting. I envision her instead as a weaver, grasping for every thread, no matter

how weak or tenuous, and, then, brilliantly weaving every last one into the rich, vivid tapestry that was her life.

I keep coming back to Lisa's essay. In its closing paragraph about connections, she wrote about reaching out to someone:

"She [the knitter] smiled and as we talked her face grew lighter. I said goodbye and cried all the way home. I won't hesitate next time. I'll remember that being connected by the thinnest string is a thousand times better than being alone."

Thank you, Lisa, for not hesitating. We are all better for it.

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Mother-Daughter Lunch

By Lisa Flaxman

Yesterday, I had a lovely morning with my 6-year-old daughter, Sophie. It was quite unexpected. While my husband took the boys to baseball, Sophie and I went to get a quick trim, which she only agrees to twice a year. She came with me to get a pedicure and sat patiently while my toes turned the beautiful shade of pink she chose for me. We went to the barrette store and then decided to have lunch at a Thai restaurant, where we like to go when there are no fussy food boys around. The restaurant was empty except for a woman sitting alone near the window next to us. She had a turban on her head and was knitting something spectacular and golden. I focused on Sophie and we ordered, sharing fried tofu and vegetarian pad thai. I wanted to just enjoy lunch, as the mother of a beautiful little girl, without getting caught up in that other stuff. But my eyes kept slipping past Sophie time after time.

I tried, I really tried, but I couldn't do it.

Is she all alone? How can I let her know I was sitting in her seat, carefully sipping soup under a wig not long ago? How can I show her that although I look normal, I'm not? And will that make her feel better? Or does she want [to] forget for a while and just eat? Does she see me looking at her hat and think I am uncomfortable? How can I make sure she doesn't misinterpret my staring for fear, rather than for support? I wished I had a secret signal.

We finished our meal. As we waited for the bill, I told the woman that her knitting was beautiful, and that last year, at the Lombardi Cancer Center, where I was a patient, there was a knit-in, with the most beautiful streamers of color and texture strung from the stairs. I told her that I used to go with my grandmother to pick wool and wished I could knit, but never did learn. Too impatient, even when I was stuck at home during the tired months.

She smiled and as we talked her face grew lighter. I said goodbye and cried all the way home. I won't hesitate next time. I'll remember that being connected by the thinnest string is a thousand times better than being alone. **B**

This essay was Lisa's submission to the 2008 Bethesda Literary Festival essay competition.