Remembrance and Reflection on Elizabeth Alling Sewall

Remarks by Gordon Sewall

We are so pleased to see so many of you here this afternoon. The out pouring of support for the Alling Sewall families has been a great source of comfort for Scott, Duncan, Cynthia, Greg and me. We thank you.

I have a few tales to tell you this afternoon that I hope will help bring Elizabeth to life in your hearts and minds as a reminder that she is still with us although we have lost our ability to see, hear or touch her, she is still here. I have my designated speaker Sam Rodman, near by should I falter. If necessary, Sam will speak my words to you.

Cynthia recalls a moment while the family was preparing for a long drive from Blairstown, New Jersey to Bronxville, NY, when a three year old Elizabeth stood on the top of the stairs with her hands on her hips and shouted to the rest of the family "OK everybody, let's get organized!" Knowing how stressful even a celebration such as this can be, I thought it appropriate to get us started with an Elizabethesque group exercise. So, on the count of three, excuse your self to your neighbor, because we are a little packed in here, put your hands on your hips and shout out "Let's Get Organized!" Ready, 1.2.3...

Elizabeth's high-octane enthusiasm was evident in all that she did. Perhaps the most vivid display of her enthusiasm was along the sidelines or in the stands of the hundreds perhaps thousands of games she attended wildly cheering for Scott and Duncan and for many of you as well. She loved competition but perhaps most of all she loved to see us give our best – to succeed was to do your best. And she had a keen eye for our best efforts.

Overpriced, over exposed athletes couldn't hold her attention, but she could watch kids and gimpy friends compete all day long. We all have our memories of Elizabeth as super fan, often taking in tennis games at West Chop when little was at stake beyond the satisfaction of surviving 3 sets and perhaps a clever shot or two. She rarely missed one of Scott's or Duncan's games and what you may not know is that it was not unusual for her to take in games when she had only a casual acquaintance with players on either side, she simply wanted to support kids giving their best.

AND she loved to cheer all participants on, with that signature Elizabeth cheer, you know the one I mean, right? Those of you who had the opportunity to share a sideline with Elizabeth with your video camera running have a permanent record of her unbridled enthusiasm as a part of your family video archives. Check it out; hearing her cheer will make you smile.

I want to read an email Aidan Hardy sent to Elizabeth upon learning that continued treatment was likely at an end and we were beginning her final journey with Hospice. Aidan wrote the following:

Dear Elizabeth,

I've struggled with writing this, so I'll keep it short so I don't get maudlin. I am in awe of your family, how you have drawn closer together through this. I am in awe of your boys, of Scott for trying to take care of Duncan, for both of them being able to go back to camp and be counselors for younger boys. I am in awe of Gordon, and the grace with which he speaks of you, even in crowded hospital hallways.

I haven't reached that point of acceptance, so I'll admit that I still think this is horribly, horribly unfair. You are dynamic, energetic, funny, caring, and above all have a gift for bringing people together. I feel lucky to have known you.

It's impossible to know how to end this, so I'll say this. I will never be able to attend any sort of athletic event without imagining your voice, rising above the rest of the cheering fans.

Love,

Aidan

Two Saturdays ago, Milton's varsity football team played in a hard fought home opener against Lawrence Academy, a place of particular importance and affection for us as it is at Lawrence where Elizabeth and I met and started our lives together. In the end, Milton won the game yet there was no shame in losing that day; both teams gave their best. I spoke with several players, coaches and parents who told me that they could feel Elizabeth's spirit in the air, even see it in the EAS decals the boys chose to wear on their helmets in her memory. Her spirit was with us all day and in the end she moved from team to team thanking the players for giving their best. That's the way she would end it, appreciation for the collective best effort.

To know Elizabeth was to know her legendary, unshakable honesty. We all have stories of her telling us how she saw things. Further, we experienced some of that telling a bit uncomfortably. I would worry from time to time that such directness could get her in trouble, although it never did. It was just too direct, too, well, honest so even if we didn't like it, we respected the source and often found we had some resolve and resilience we didn't know existed until she coached it out.

She always told the truth to the best of her ability. I believe that this quality above all, generated great confidence in all of us that when we asked, and even when we didn't, she would give it to us straight and in the end this honesty helped shape our thinking and responses into the right or at least the most ethical action for that situation.

Elizabeth was a master connector. She had seemingly limitless capacity for absorbing details about the people in her life and, more significantly, she had extraordinary empathy and because of it she understood us in ways that surprised us. She knew you, sometimes better than you knew yourself. Never judgmental, she accepted each of us as an interesting work in progress and she would only lose patience if we stopped trying to make progress. This made her the best kind of friend.

She ordered her view of the world on these personal connections that had all kinds of complexity associated with them. A genius at reconstructing family trees, who knew whom, when they met each other and, in almost freakish detail, what they said in a particular situation many years ago. A master connector, indeed.

And she did this in all situations. I remember a time during one of the early stays at the Brigham when we were just settling into her room and learning the routine, nurses and doctors coming and going, lots of activity going on. I decided this was a good moment to go get my lunch, so I excused myself and headed to the elevators. I recall thinking that a hospital is such an elaborate stage for this vast and disparate assemblage of people all with their own life stories and in varying states of crisis with this amazing overlay of equally complex caregivers helping to manage these crises and doing it in such a loving and unselfish way. I also recall feeling that there is an expected anonymity in such a setting - patients and their families keeping to themselves during a particularly stressful time in their lives. People don't often make friends while under these challenging circumstances.

After my lunch, I returned to Elizabeth's room to encounter this symphony of conversation between a surgery resident, two nurses, a house keeper and Elizabeth. Turns out that she had uncovered common ground with everyone in the room, one lived in Milton, one is a dental patient of my niece, one knew my college roommate, everybody seemingly spent 40% of their time running errands to the Fruit Center in East Milton and so on. I headed for lunch feeling anonymous within this throng of sick people, their families and an army of extraordinary caregivers only to return to a room full of second cousins and new best friends.

Her connections with all of you gave her great strength during the hardest times. She worried about you having to deal with life without her. She so wanted you to be OK, to remember the kindnesses she shared with you and, if possible, wanted you to pay them forward. To help a friend asking nothing in return and to do it with a smile and a hearty laugh if possible.

Elizabeth received a devastating diagnosis 18 months ago and, at the time, we were told the average survival span for her disease was two years. We never discussed prognosis again until the last few weeks of her life when we had to make decisions about getting our family together as quickly as possible. We had this theory that fueled our ability to fully enjoy the time we had left together. We called it Half of X. The idea is that none of us can know how much time we have left to live but some of us know, via a diagnosis, that the time is not open ended. Let's call the time we have left X. In addition, having received a tough diagnosis, we don't know how much energy we are going to have or how we are going to feel through X with the disease present and side effects looming but we can posit that the first half of X will be better than the second.

The first half of X is also the time when the shock and fear over the newly discovered disease can derail dreams, plans and aspirations replacing them with despair, desperation and all consuming sadness. Well, that seemed like a big waste of time to Elizabeth. She sought to live with cancer not die from it. We talked a lot about the first half of X and what we could do with that time to ensure it was the most meaningful and fulfilling. We talked about exotic travel - a wide array of self-indulgences, some I can't list here in church. In the end, it came down to living life, a simple and deeply intimate life with our boys and all of you. Elizabeth's happiest moments and greatest joys were experienced as a daughter, mother, wife and friend.

So that is what we all saw over the last 18 months, no self-pity, no despair and no anger. She was going to take each day as she always had - a time to cherish, a time to celebrate good fortune, friendship and, most of all, family. There was a nothing to cheer for in a world-class cruise and there was everything to cheer for here on the fields at Milton Academy and in the many communities in which she lived.

Elizabeth was and still is, immensely proud of Scott and Duncan. She could visualize your futures, imagining you as men making a difference in the world, caring fathers immersed in your children's lives with wives who love you the way she loved me. She wanted to be sure that you knew how much she believed in you. She hoped most of all that you would celebrate her by living your lives to the fullest, and yes experience some profound sadness for a while, she certainly wanted to be missed, but she did not want you to be sad for too long, there is just too much living to do.

Elizabeth never lost her sense of optimism or humor. In her last days, Birdy and I would find ourselves talking to her as we tended to medications etc. Birdy frequently referred to Elizabeth as “my girl” as in “that’s my girl” I had my own ways of speaking to her so we would continue in parallel using our own terms of endearment while we puttered through the business of keeping her comfortable. She was mostly asleep during those last days so most of this conversation was one way with neither of us sure if she was hearing us or not. One afternoon, while bantering away, I diverged off the normal path and said to her, “that’s my girl” at which point she opened her eyes turned to me and said firmly (pause) “don’t call me girl!”

Some of you know that Elizabeth gave of herself to support breast cancer research with the hope that she might help future generations of women and their families. She even underwent an elective procedure to give more tissue to the Dana-Farber’s research team. I remember one morning in the hospital when Elgene Lim, one of her doctors and a top researcher at Dana, came into her hospital room enthusiastically telling her that he had successfully placed pieces of her tissue in 15 mice that morning. Well, you would have thought they just scored the winning touchdown, broad smiles and high fives all around! PAUSE It felt a little grim to me too, but that moment and there were many others, was an example of her desire to transform her devastating illness into hope. She used to joke with Eric Winer, the lead oncologist on her team at Dana, that she wanted to be Elgene’s personal lab rat. Again humor filled the room at these moments yet the driver was always her commitment to help others in whatever way she could.

I want to leave you with two important points. First, I believe in my heart that Elizabeth died happy. She knew she had done a good job in her professional life and she knew that she had produced two loving and thoughtful children who would carry forward in life in uniquely positive ways. And second, we were often asked about how we managed the difficulties of her illness particularly at the crisis points - a prominent example being the trips to the emergency room in the wee hours of the morning. In many ways one can never be more alone than in those moments of desperation and abject fear. But it was not like that for us. We had elements of the crisis to manage for sure and they were frightening all right, but in the darkness we found that, alone and together at the same time, we became closer, much closer. I know that illness defines some people and I know that it often fractures relationships causing people to drift further apart. In our case we became closer and closer and, in the end, we had enough time to celebrate our lifetime together. A true gift for which we were truly grateful.

In those last days of her life before conversation became impossible, we talked about closeness and we talked about what a gift it was to have it and we talked about how we hoped so much that the people we care about could experience it in their own lives someday too, especially our boys. When she could no longer communicate I sat next to her bed, reassuring her that although we will be forever diminished without her physically in our lives, we would be OK, urging her to leave us and be at peace, I repeated the following prayer, which I'll say to you today:

Step by step
Closer and closer
Now and forever

I will fold you into my heart
And from this point on,
When I speak of courage, friendship or family,
I will speak with one voice.

Two as one, in love
Forever and ever

God bless you Elizabeth, and I'll see you when I see you.