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Jessica Saal, advocate for arthritis sufferers

MORE THAN 700 ATTEND FUNERAL FOR PALO ALTO NATIVE

By Betty Barnacle
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Jessica Lynn Saal was an optimist, sure that no matter what problem life gave her, she would be able to rise above it.

And the Palo Alto native did just that until her 34th birthday last Friday when the juvenile rheumatoid arthritis that had plagued her since she was 2 finally took her life.

Two years ago she developed a rare complication of the disease that caused kidney failure, requiring daily dialysis. Then the disease impaired a heart muscle until it failed, according to her father, Harry Saal, a well-known Silicon Valley entrepreneur who formed Network Associates and other companies.

"She never complained, never said, 'Why me?' and minimized her problems," her father said. "A good many didn't know about them."

Vickie Lau, vice president of programs for the Arthritis Foundation, Northern California Region, where Ms. Saal was a member of the executive board, said, "Jessica was a problem solver, very active on the local advocacy committee and vice chair of the Peninsula subcommittee. She was always happy, smiling and upbeat. We actually never knew how ill she was. Her death was a shock to us."

Ms. Saal "was so strong," said Monica Johnson of San Jose, a foundation volunteer who also has juvenile rheumatoid arthritis. "I knew she had eight joint replacements. But nothing really stopped her. I know how hard it is when you're a child and you can't do things like the other kids."

Ms. Saal led a group to Sacramento in the fall and talked to legislators about the issues facing arthritis victims, especially the cost of miracle drugs not covered by HMOs, her father said.

She was a graduate of Tufts University and an active volunteer for the Jewish Community Federation and New Bridges to Jewish Community. She helped with "To Life," the annual Jewish cultural festival on California Avenue in Palo Alto.

Ms. Saal lived independently, with roommates who helped her do things she couldn't do, such as shampoo and comb her hair, her father said.

A woman whose life was saluted by more than 700 people who attended her funeral Monday at Congregation Beth Am, Ms. Saal fought against injustice, her father said. He said she succeeded in becoming a soprano with the Mission Valley Choir although it was painful for her to confront the synchronized group over the fact she couldn't raise her arms as high or march up stairs like the other members.

"It was a real step for that organization to accept her," he said. "and one example of how she changed the world."

Jessica Lynn Saal

Born: Jan. 16, 1970, in Palo Alto

Died: Jan. 16, 2004, at Stanford

Survived by: Her parents, Carol and Harry Saal, and brother, Nate Saal, all of Palo Alto; and her grandmother, Edith D'Esopo of West Hartford, Conn.

Services: Have been held.

Memorial: Donations may be made in Ms. Saal's name to the Jessica Fund, a memorial fund in support of the new Campus for Jewish Life, 12 acres under development in Palo Alto. Send donations care of the Campus for Jewish Life, 5150 El Camino Real, Suite 11D, Los Altos, Calif. 94022..

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