

Mom records tot's cancer fight

The story of Amber:
Controversial book is tribute to girl, and to those who helped.

By William Hanrahan
Register Staff

The pictures alone in this new book could make you cry: the slight, naked body of a 4-year-old girl lying on a bed, so innocent and natural at first.

But then you see it: the huge tumor jutting out from behind her right ear.

It was 16 years ago when that cancerous growth killed Amber Calistro as she lay in her bed at her Milford home.

This month, however, Amber is in a sense reborn, in the pages of "Embrace the

Angel," a book published by Amber's mother, Patti Stiewing.

Stiewing, 43, calls the new book "the most controversial in decades" because it attaches the face of a child to a disease that she believes is usually portrayed with anonymous statistics.

"It's scary to see it," Stiewing said. "The book, actually, for the first time, shows cancer. It isn't just a little girl getting bald and skinny. I think just the actual photographs of cancer will wake some people up."

Consider the words under a picture of Stiewing holding Amber after giving her daughter her last bath: "Cancer glared at

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Embrace the Angel



One mother's lifelong quest to give cancer an identity.

Patti Stiewing

FOREWORD BY BERNIE S. SIEGEL, M.D.

The cover of "Embrace the Angel."

Cancer: Book offers criticism

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me," she writes. "God, how I hate it... The sight of it, the smell of it... It's eating my little girl alive. My instinct is to kill this thing, to protect my baby. But I know I would kill Amber, not the cancer."

Stiewing, who lives in Annapolis, Md., recalls the way Amber clung to her fading independence with fierce determination.

"She stopped eating and would only drink soda from a cup," Stiewing writes. "As the painkillers made her drowsy, the cup would start to fall and I'd reach for it to keep it from spilling. She'd snap out of her daze. 'Mom! I can hold it!'"

The book also is controversial, Stiewing says, because it criticizes the U.S. medical establishment — including Yale-New Haven Hospital — for focusing the bulk of its cancer treatment on radiation therapies and surgery, rather than exploring alternative approaches used throughout the world.

Unhappy with what she considered limited options at Yale-New Haven Hospital, Stiewing's book recounts how she sought publicity on her child's plight through the New Haven Register, appealing for information on alternative treatments.

Stiewing's international search eventually led her to the Bahamas, where Amber underwent immunotherapy, a method of stimulating the body's natural immune system to help it fight the cancer.

Ken Best, a spokesman for Yale-New Haven Hospital, said he was not familiar with the book. But Best said that generally, the hospital cannot use any treatments that have not been approved by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration.

Stiewing said her next project is to create an impartial panel of experts to produce a manual on the best cancer cures, including methods not allowed in the United States.

"We have chemotherapy, radiation and surgery, period," Stiewing said. "People actually have to become criminals to get (alternative) cancer treatment."

In a telephone interview from Annapolis, Stiewing said she will never forget the kindness of residents in Milford and the New Haven area who read the stories about Amber in the Register and reached out with letters and other acts of compassion.

"I still have every single letter that everybody wrote," she said. "It (the book) is not just a tribute to Amber. It's a tribute to those people out there as well."

Anyone wishing to contact Stiewing can write to her at P.O. Box 4475, Annapolis, Md. 21403.

The bulk of the proceeds from the book will be used to fight disease in children, she said.

"I never felt that Amber left me. I just felt she changed. I've always carried her inside me. Now that I've finished the book, I feel as if I've given birth to her again. I do feel the same sense of motherhood."

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