

Breath is Life, As a Father's Memory Lives On

by Jane M. Martin

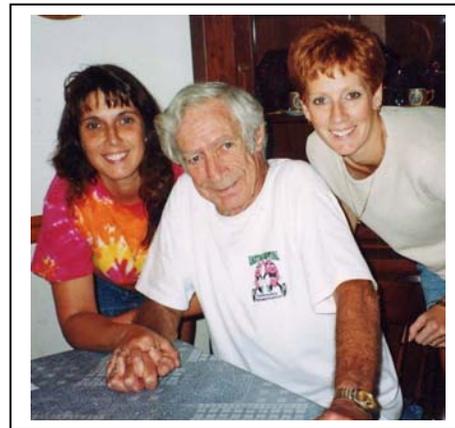
Not long ago I received an email from Lori Palermo, wanting to tell me the story of her dad whom she lost to emphysema. Every time a patient or family member shares his or her story, I am again assured that stories are vitally important to surviving and thriving with pulmonary disease! This is the story of Wayne Litzenberger and his battle with Emphysema as told by his daughter, Lori.

As Lori Litzenberger was growing up, she didn't have just a father. To Lori, the little girl in a small town in Pennsylvania with dark hair and bright eyes, her dad, Wayne Litzenberger, was her very best pal. Born with a dislocated left hip, Lori endured three surgeries before completing first grade. And when she was hurting, she felt that everything would be alright if Dad was there. Lori just knew in her heart that he always would be, but little did she know what that really meant.

Although you will never have the honor of meeting my dad, I invite you to spend a few minutes getting to know him just a little bit through the stories of music, love, and joy I share with you here. I have so many wonderful memories of Dad and all the things we did together. Of course, I remember the simple things, like every day after school watching "Mister Roger's Neighborhood," singing, "It's Such a Good Feeling" and "Won't You Be My Neighbor?"

My dad enjoyed the holidays and he loved traditions. He loved a big Thanksgiving dinner, cooked by my mom, and having us around the dining room table, the whole family together. He made sure every holiday was something special for my little sister, Erika, and me. I remember as we decorated our house for Christmas, we would dance around singing "It's Beginning to Look A Lot Like Christmas!"

My father was also a gifted musician. He had played the trumpet as a young boy, and was in several swing bands as he got older. He was an excellent piano and organ player, and was amazing because he could sit down, pick a song out of his head, and play it without the music. He called it "faking." We called it talent. I, too, learned to play the piano and the organ and Dad and I would play duets together. We were both so proud of sharing our musical talent. Well, actually, I think my dad was proud of me, and I was so proud to make music with him. I adored him.



Lori, Dad, and Erika

Dad's most favorite holiday was Christmas. Every year, Dad, Erika and I would take a day and go shopping for presents for my mom. Then we would go out for lunch. When Erika, and I were young, Dad started building a big train platform to put the Christmas tree on. Each year he added things to the platform, and as we got older, Erika and I added to it. We built model houses, bought little people, cars and trees. Dad was so proud of it. We put it up at Christmas and loved to watch the houses light up and run the trains. Dad never wanted us to see the tree before Christmas day, so on Christmas Eve, after the candlelight church service, Dad would play Santa Claus and he and my mom would put up the tree. What a wonderful surprise for two little girls on Christmas morning!

And what a camera bug! At home he was always taking pictures, no matter what we were doing. Some of the pictures are funny -- and embarrassing!!! We had boxes and boxes of family slides from all of our vacations. Later he started video taping our birthdays, holidays and vacations.

My dad absolutely loved Florida and Disney World. He was like a little kid at Disney. He would plan every detail of the vacation, from sight-seeing the historical parts of Florida, going to Disney World, to staying out on the beach, swimming in the ocean, and picking seashells all day. Our vacations to Florida were so special to him... to all of us. My dad was truly the heart of our family.



My father was diagnosed with Emphysema in 1991. He had been a smoker since his early teenage years, smoking as much as one to two packs a day. Upon hearing the diagnosis, he immediately quit smoking. However, a lot of damage had already been done. Soon after being diagnosed, Dad was frequently rushed to the hospital with a respiratory infection or pneumonia, each time losing more of his lung elasticity and breathing capacity. But he was always a fighter and each time would bounce back to a partially normal life.

He was a very proud man. He did not want anyone to see how bad the emphysema was really affecting his breathing. COPD/Emphysema is a slow, debilitating disease damaging the lungs in a way that only the patient may really realize. So through those first years his shortness of breath was not very noticeable to us. But in the last few years of dad's life, he was taken to the hospital in respiratory distress more often. He was getting pneumonia more frequently.

At that time I lived about an hour away from my family, so I was always waiting for that awful call from my mom that dad had been rushed to the hospital again. One time that is so vivid in my mind is when he had double pneumonia, and the first time they had to put him on the ventilator. It was heartbreaking just seeing him lying there with the tube down his throat, not being able to talk, but only look at us with such fright in his eyes. For the most part they kept him sedated and as comfortable as possible. As for my mom, my sister, and myself, we were terrified we were going to lose him. But, dad pulled through again.

It always seemed that dad would get sick in December, but he never failed to make it home for Christmas. We would tease him and say he was like a cat with *nine lives*. It still didn't occur to me consciously that my dad's lungs were truly failing. But, when I look back, there were things that I did that actually told me sub-consciously what I did not want to believe. The Christmas before dad passed away, I took many family pictures with each of us posing with him. I started going to Mom and Dad's house over the weekends and spending more time with him. We spent time

watching our family slides together, all those old slides that he took himself. Those memories meant so much. On his last birthday, August 28, 2003, again, I took several family pictures. Those are the last pictures we have of him.

In October, a few months before he passed away, I started researching Emphysema on the internet, and showed my dad the information. We were even looking into a hospital to have him evaluated for Lung Volume Reduction Surgery. His shortness of breath was becoming more noticeable, even with him trying to hide it. After he would use his nebulizer, my dad still had shortness of breath, and when I would ask him about it, he would just say, "Oh, it takes a little while to kick in."

Dad's quality of life began getting worse and the fight he had in him was beginning to fade. I couldn't help but notice that he was sitting much more, always in his same chair in the dining room. He was always the first one I saw when I walked in the house. I finally decided to go to one of his doctor's appointments with him and my mom to actually find out how bad he really was. The doctor told us he was in the "severe stages" of Emphysema, but, if he took care of himself, he could have a few more years of life. That was October 28th. His next appointment was scheduled for December 16th, but he never made it.

Ten days before Christmas 2003, Dad was rushed to the hospital with another lung infection. We were told he would be put on a ventilator and kept comfortable until the infection was cleared up. We knew that dad was sick, but never expected that this time he would not be coming back home. This last infection was too much for his lungs to handle. He could not breathe without the ventilator and even then, he was suffering horribly.

On December 26th at 2:30 in the morning, I got that terrible call. I had to come to the hospital immediately. My mom, my sister, and I had to make the hardest decision of our lives. "What would Dad have wanted us to do?" Erika and I could not imagine letting Dad go.

But then it came pouring out. My mom began telling us how sick dad really was, and the struggles he had been having just to get through a normal day. She saw the way he had been suffering; how he struggled climbing steps, how he could not lift his arms to get dressed and undressed, and how he finally just wanted to give up. He felt he could not live like this any longer and did not want to be a burden on his family. And he did not want my sister or I to know any of this, because he didn't want to hurt us.

The saddest day of my life was that day, the day we had to take my dad off the ventilator and watch him slowly pass away. On the day after Christmas at 7:30am, my dad, Wayne A. Litzenberger, passed away from COPD/Emphysema. He was just 71 years old. He left us behind; Lee, my mom and his devoted wife of 48 years, Erika and me, and three grandsons. My dad, my friend, was gone. The only comfort I have is knowing that he can now breathe again without struggling. He is in heaven where there is all the air he will ever need.



But my story doesn't end here. Far from it! In fact, we're just beginning... In losing my dad I realized that I have only one regret, and it is that I did not start learning about

COPD/Emphysema years ago. My family knew nothing about the disease. We were all so lost and confused. I now believe there is so much more we could have done for dad and given him those extra years, *and made them even better years*. If only we knew more about emphysema when he was in the early stages, learning more about this debilitating disease and how to live with it. He worked so hard to cover it up, instead of facing it with our help. Maybe he felt guilty because of his smoking. Maybe he was embarrassed. Maybe if dad would have taken better care of himself, helping to fight off infections and also using his oxygen as he was told to, he would have lived longer. Maybe this...maybe that...if only...we can look back and question ourselves all day long. **But life goes on, and that's the real reason that I am sharing our story with you.**

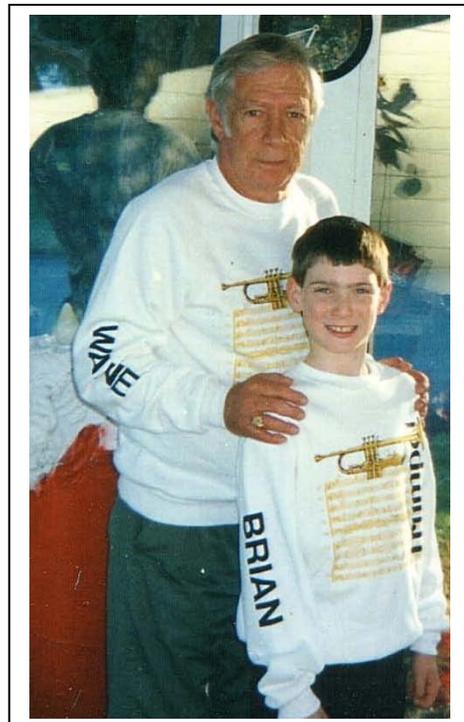
I want to get the word out about Lung Disease – to let people know there is so much help for the families and their loved ones struggling with this disease. In losing my dad the way we did, my family experienced a very emotional and traumatic event that will impact our lives forever. It doesn't have to be that way for you! If I can help just one family – even just one person – understand that there is hope, all the work that I am doing will be worth it.

My goals are: First, to get the message out to adolescents and inform them of the risks and dangers of cigarette smoking. Second, is to inform individuals and their families, who are struggling with a lung disease that there is information and help available to them – and let them know that they are not alone in this effort to fight for the **Breath of Life!** This is why I am a volunteer for the American Lung Association, and I am a member of EFFORTS (Emphysema Foundation For Our Right To Survive), and BBLW (Breathing Better, Living Well). I have also taken the *Freedom From Smoking* Training Class, and I would like to start my own Smoking Cessation Class.

You know, I never – ever – imagined losing my dad, even through the years of his illness. To me, he had eternal life. It just never entered my mind that one day Dad would pass away. But in spite of all the emptiness and pain, I have gained so much. And even though he is no longer here, my dad lives on within us in the gifts that we continue to discover.

In healthier days, my dad taught my son to play the trumpet. My son was in the band all through high school. Now my nephew has taken up playing the trumpet. There is a little bit of “Pop-Pop” in each of the boys! Before he passed away, Dad gave my son, Brian, some of his photo equipment. My son now takes beautiful pictures and is very proud of his work.

Lori's son, Brian, and his “Pop-Pop” wearing their matching trumpet shirts.



0The day Dad was buried, December 29th, was a cold and dreary day. My heart was shattered as I realized that I had lost my father, my lifelong friend. But as the service at the cemetery went on, the heavy clouds somehow opened and the warm rays of the sun shone down on us. I lifted my face to the sky and felt the comfort of the sun's warmth. I knew it was my dad looking down on us, and helping us know that we could, that I could – *and I must* – go on.

*True to her mission, Lori acted as the Family Team Chairperson of the American Lung Association's **Breath of Life** walk in October of 2004. Their team was called "The Knights of Melody," the name of Wayne Litzengerger's band. The money they raised went to the American Lung Association for research, education, and awareness in fighting all types of Lung Disease. Lori is again a part of the committee for the walk scheduled for October 2005. You may contact her at <angels1220@aol.com>*

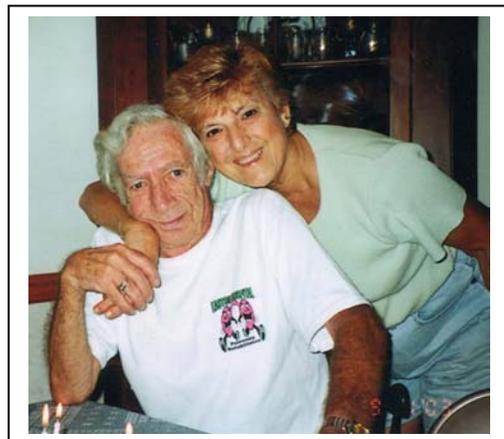
Lori has also designed a symbol, Lung Disease Awareness / Breathing is Life, which is available as a magnet. A portion of the proceeds go to the American Lung Association and the Breathing Better, Living Well Pulmonary Rehab scholarship fund.



It takes breath to make the pinwheel spin. *Breathing is Life.*



The "Knights of Melody"
Breath of Life walk team



Wayne and Lee Litzengerger