

## A Heartfelt Connection

Little Cara Lonergan spent only 13 months on this earth, but she sure had a lasting impact on the many people who met, treated and loved her.

"She had a magnetic personality," says Dolores Grenier, Cara's mother, who turned her grief into years of tireless volunteering at Hartford Hospital to "stay connected" to her daughter.

Cara was born at the Hospital in 1990 with a congenital heart defect and underwent closed-heart surgery at four days old. She spent 10 days in the neo-natal intensive care unit under the care of Dr. Daniel Diana, pediatric cardiologist, whom Dolores describes as "a marvelous human being."

For the next year, "Cara was so in touch with people around her, so engaging," recalls Dolores. "In her stroller, she would lock eyes with people and follow them around. Other people would go out of their way to pay attention to her."

Dolores and her husband, Tom Lonergan, so enjoyed sharing Cara with the world during those 12 months. But shortly after her first birthday, Cara had to undergo open-heart surgery.

When she was wheeled into recovery, Dolores immediately noticed Cara's pink lips and hands, so in contrast to the blue discoloration caused by cyanosis.

"The first thing out of my mouth was 'look at those pink hands and lips,'" says Dolores. "I gave Dr. [Lee] Eliason [cardiac surgeon] a big hug and he said 'don't go schmoozing with me, look at your daughter.'"

A day and a half later—suddenly and inexplicably—Cara passed away.

"It was tragic and very difficult to understand," says Dolores. "But my lasting impression of the experience is of the generous and caring spirit of the medical staff and doctors. We hugged, they shared our grief, and they came to Cara's memorial service."

Now, in reflection, Dolores "almost feels like Cara's mission on earth was kind of complete—for a lot of different reasons."

One reason was the meaningful association it brought between Dolores and Hartford Hospital, one that has lasted 14 years and has helped keep Cara's memory alive. The link became more real when she learned that the Hospital's 1993 Black & Red gala would benefit pediatric cardiology. She volunteered to help.

"It was a perfect connection working with the people in Fund Development, doing whatever I could to help with the gala," recalls Dolores. "I brought in photo albums to share with them; they were wonderful, very supportive, welcoming and warm. If I hadn't had that experience, I probably wouldn't have continued."

Dolores and Tom attended the gala in 1993 and were reunited with many of the medical staff who cared for Cara, including Dr. Ellison, who co-chaired the event

At about the same time, unable to have more children, Dolores and Tom adopted two daughters from Bolivia, Teresa at three weeks old and, two years later, Elisa at seven months old.

"When Cara passed away, Dr. Ellison said he hoped that I would think about being a parent again because he thought I would be a good mother," says Dolores. "When I learned I couldn't get pregnant again, we turned to adoption."

Even with all the "mommy stuff" that Dolores has performed for Teresa and Elisa for 13 years, she has made it a point to strengthen her "Cara connection" with Hartford Hospital. As a school library media specialist, she was very much at home assisting in the education library of the Hospital's Avon Wellness Center.

Sometime later, she was asked to participate on a task force to study the Hospital's annual campaign. "Tom and I had been annual contributors for many years," says Dolores. "And every year we received thank-you notes that expressed hope that our girls were well. These were very special to me and left a very positive impression, which is why I agreed to help."

In 2002, Dolores attended an information session at the Avon Wellness Center where she had the chance to meet and talk with Dr. Henry Low. When she learned that the Hospital was seeking volunteers for its Avon Town Committee to support its 150<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Campaign, she agreed to be a co-chair.

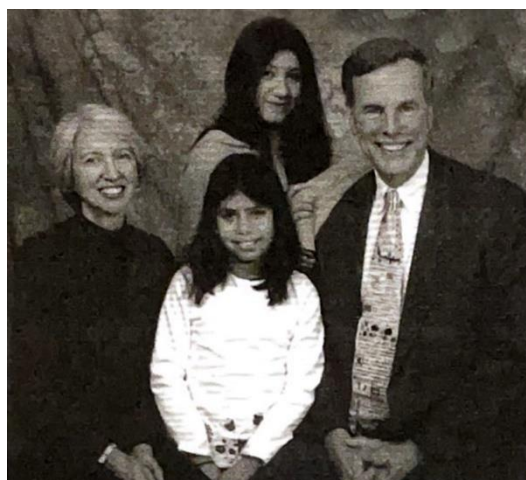
"I think there's no greater gift than good health," says Dolores. "And the Anniversary Campaign was all about people making any contribution of time or treasure to insure good health care for our community for the years ahead."

Two years later, Dolores was invited to become a Hospital Corporator, which she quickly accepted. Not long afterward, she found herself discussing medical liability reform in a meeting with State Senator Thomas J. Herlihy.

I read about the malpractice issue in the Corporators' Newsletter and called Kevin Kinsella [the Hospital's Vice President of Government Relations] to see how I could advocate for the Hospital," says Dolores. "He suggested I contact Senator Herlihy. The meeting we had was good exchange of opinions and a very positive experience for me."

Also in 2004, Dolores stepped up once again, agreeing to co-chair the Community Partners' Annual Campaign Committee.

"It was another ironic twist when I learned that Dr. Leon Chameides was on that committee," says Dolores, who later became co-chair of the Hospital's 2005-6 Annual Campaign. "He was there when Cara died. All of these ties to the Hospital and Cara—it makes you wonder."



**Dolores Grenier and Tom Lonergan with their children Teresa (top) and Elisa**



**Cara Lonergan celebrates her first birthday**