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Denise Rich has some powerful allies in her fight to end cancer: Paul McCartney, Stevie Wonder, and Jordan's Queen Noor have pledged to support the foundation she started in memory of her daughter. BY JOAN SMITH

Songs in the Key of Life

DENISE RICH IS, BY ANYONE'S standards, a successful woman. She is hugely wealthy, thanks to her 25-year marriage to billionaire commodities trader Marc Rich, which ended in 1991. The parties she gives at her house in Aspen and in her sprawling Fifth Avenue penthouse are legendary. And as a mother of three who clearly did not need to work for a living, she turned a dream of performing her own music into an impressive career as a song-

writer. A three-time Grammy Award nominee, Rich writes for pop music's hottest performers—Marc Anthony, Natalie Cole, Aretha Franklin, and Celine Dion, among them—and her songs have graced the soundtracks of a number of films, including *The First Wives Club* and *Runaway Bride*. Yet all her money, talent, and drive seemed utterly inadequate when Gabrielle, the second of her three daughters, called her one day in 1992 to say she thought she had cancer. "She was

in Hollywood and I was in Europe, and she said, 'Mom, I felt a lump.' And I was like, 'Oh, it's no big deal, don't worry about it,'" Rich says ruefully. "That's the way I deal with everything. You could tell me there's a fire or an earthquake and I'm like, 'Oh, please.'" Rich has been an irrepressible optimist since she was a child growing up in Worcester, Massachusetts, the younger daughter of Holocaust survivors. "I've always felt I was lucky and blessed to be born," she

Rich at home in her Manhattan apartment, November 2000

says. But a diagnosis of cancer is the one piece of news that can shake her confidence in a happy ending. Her best friend in high school died of leukemia at 16. And in 1984 her beloved older sister, Monique, died at the age of 45, after a ten-year struggle with breast cancer.

It was during Monique's painful ordeal that Rich bought a guitar and started writing songs. "Originally, songwriting was just a way to communicate with the people closest to me," she says. "It's odd, because I'm so verbal but I have a really hard time speaking about my deepest feelings."

Rich decided to enter two of her compositions in a contest sponsored by the American Song Festival. Much to her delight, she won lyric awards for both songs. But she was characteristically impatient. "I hadn't been writing for very long, but

melody, orchestration. She knew immediately that the song was the best she'd ever written, and she knew, too, that it was a gift from her sister. Rich called it "Frankie" and sent it to a music lawyer. Almost overnight, it seemed, Sister Sledge had recorded the song, and Rich had her first number one hit. "My sister gave me my career," she says.

In 1989 Rich's mother died, also of cancer. "We were soul close," Rich says. "And when she died, I had experiences where she spoke to me. I have always been able to feel her presence, her words, her energy. But when my daughter got sick—there really is no pain to compare it to."

Gabrielle was both beautiful and brilliant. She'd graduated from Oxford University with honors. She was a champion ski racer, an expert horseback rider, and an avid mountain climber. She wanted

"At first, I was so angry," Rich says of her daughter's death.

"I wasn't doing anything." But she felt compelled to keep the promises she'd made to Gabrielle.

to be an actress and screenwriter, so she studied filmmaking at New York University, then moved to Hollywood.

She was just 23 when she found the lump in her neck. At the famed Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minnesota, Gabrielle was diagnosed with advanced Hodgkin's disease. "I was in such denial," Rich says, shaking her head. "I just couldn't deal with it." Yet she threw herself into the search for just the right doctor in New York. "One told Gabrielle, 'You're going to die,' and another said, 'We're just going to treat it like [it's no more life-threatening than] the flu.' And I said, 'It's going to be the flu,'" Rich recalls. "'It's going to be over and you'll be fine.'"

So Gabrielle endured chemotherapy and radiation. She lost her hair but refused all sympathy. "She said, 'Don't you dare cry,'" Rich recalls. "She wanted music in her room, and she'd just blast it. A doctor would come in and she'd say, 'One minute. Listen to this beat.'"

All that pain and optimism seemed to find its reward when Gabrielle's cancer went into remission. She married her fiancé, Philip Aouad, a commodities trader, and went back to Hollywood, landing the occasional movie role and even writing a screenplay.

"Then, three years later, Gabrielle called me from L.A. between auditions," Rich says. "She said, 'Mom, I think it's come back.' And I said, 'Don't be silly.'" But when Gabrielle flew to New York to see her oncologist, he confirmed her fear. She had AML leukemia, a secondary cancer with a low survival rate that may have been caused by the treatment for Hodgkin's. She was told that her only hope was a bone marrow transplant, but despite her family's money and connections, they couldn't find a perfect match. The closest possible donor was her mother. "I was scared to death for her," Rich says. "I'd have given her my life."

Although Rich's marrow wasn't a perfect match, it was close enough to make the attempt worthwhile. "The day of the transplant, I was recovering in my hotel room and Gabrielle called from the hospital, where she was with Philip and her sisters, and they were all jubilant," Rich says. "They do the transplant like an IV, all of this red liquid flowing into her, and she said, 'Mommy, today's my birthday because you've given me new life. It's like red wine.' And when I got there the next day, they were all celebrating and it looked as if it was going to work. For a minute."

Suddenly Gabrielle's liver was failing, then her kidneys. She was on dialysis and undergoing further chemotherapy and radiation. "She suffered so much," her mother says. "But even then, before she was in the wheelchair, she'd skip to her treatments with her headphones on." Finally, Gabrielle lapsed into a coma—but not before she'd instructed her mother to start a foundation for cancer research, produce her screenplay, and throw a birthday party in the hospital for Philip, which Rich did, with a string quartet playing her daughter's favorite music.

"For just a moment, during the party, she half sat up, trying to clap, and said 'Thank you' to me and 'Happy birthday' to Philip," says Rich, wiping tears from her face. "And then she went back into



Gabrielle Rich Aouad and Philip Aouad in Los Angeles, 1995

when I visited my sister in Boston, I told her, 'My career isn't going anywhere,'" she says, smiling now at her foolishness. "Monique was so sick at the time, but she was six years older and I always went to her for advice—she was so wise. She said, 'You need a music lawyer.' I said, 'What's that?' And she said, 'Somebody who will know the stars.'"

It would be her last visit with Monique, though Rich didn't realize it at the time. On her way home, she fell asleep on the plane and, in a dream, a song came to her, as they always do, fully realized—words,



Rich with Stevie Wonder, at the first G&P gala, 1998.

“This comes from Denise’s heart—she has no pretense, so people respond to her. Plus, she has more energy than the entire NFL.”

the coma and never woke up again.”

They were all there, holding Gabrielle, when she died on September 8, 1996. “At first I was so angry,” Rich says. “I hated everybody. I wasn’t doing *anything*.” But she had made promises to Gabrielle.

Thus began the G&P Foundation (named for Gabrielle and Philip), which raises research money for treatments for leukemia and similar cancers. Rich assembled a distinguished board of medical researchers, including Harvard’s Jerome Groopman, M.D., a professor of medicine, cancer specialist, and author of *Second Opinions*. She gave her first fund-raising gala on October 12, 1998, and 1,500 guests, including the Duchess of York,



Bill Clinton was honorary chair of the premier G&P event.

Goldie Hawn, and Stevie Wonder, pledged nearly \$3 million. Luncheons, special events, and last November’s Angel Ball followed. These days, says Rich, people just seem to come to her—Mikhail Gorbachev, Queen Noor of Jordan, and Bill Clinton have lent their support. To date,

the foundation has raised almost \$7 million and helps fund 16 projects.

“What Denise has done came about through an amazing combination of hard work, good humor, and very good connections,” says Kay J. Wight, G&P’s executive vice president. “When we were organizing last November’s gala, she spent hours on the phone with potential donors every day. It doesn’t matter where she is, she is always talking about the foundation. This comes from her heart—she has no pretense at all, so people just respond to her. Plus, she has more energy than the entire NFL.”

Rich, whose next project is to fulfill Gabrielle’s remaining final request—to produce her screenplay—still misses her daughter terribly. But she says she knows that Gabrielle is happy—and she hears her voice in quiet moments, in the shower, in bed at night.

“Gabrielle taught me that love is more important than anything, that we are here for a higher purpose, and that by helping other people I help myself,” Rich says. “Even my music has changed. After I had my first hit, I became obsessed with getting another one. But that song came from my heart, and I now know that when I listen to my heart, I am listening to the angels—and my mother, my sister, and my daughter are among them. When they guide me, I am light and open, and even the most difficult things suddenly seem almost ridiculously easy.”

Joan Smith is a former staff writer for the San Francisco Examiner. She lives in New Jersey.

What You Can Do

To contact the G&P Foundation, log on to www.gpcharity.com. Other ways to reach out to cancer patients:

IF YOU HAVE JUST ONE DAY A YEAR:

Participate in the American Cancer Society’s Relay for Life. Volunteers, who are asked to raise a minimum of \$100, gather at local football fields or community parks for an afternoon of running and walking relay races. The events are held at different times nationwide. To find one near you, call

800-ACS-2345 or log on to www.cancer.org.

IF YOU HAVE A FEW DAYS A MONTH: Train to participate in a race and raise money. The Leukemia & Lymphoma Society’s Team in Training program coaches volunteers who want to compete in fund-raising marathons, walks, or Rollerblade races. Call the Leukemia & Lymphoma Society at 800-482-8326 or visit www.lsa-teamintraining.org.

IF YOU HAVE AN HOUR A WEEK: Bake a pie or casserole for a local Ronald McDonald

House, which provides a “home away from home” for families with seriously ill children undergoing treatment. You can either cook at home or at the McDonald House. For details go to www.rmhc.com.

IF YOU WANT TO HELP SAVE A LIFE: Bone marrow donations are desperately needed around the country. To find out if you can be a donor, call the American Bone Marrow Donor Registry at 800-745-2452 or log on to www.abmdr.org.
—Allison Fashek