

# Following Life's Path

ANNALEIGH GRILO FOCUSES ON HER FUTURE WITH COURAGE, DETERMINATION

**A**nnaleigh Grilo picked up the hammer and stared at the silent bell — only rung in the oncology wing as a declaration of freedom. She looked into the crowd of supporters: family, friends and doctors who had become forged, like the bell metal, into a solid shoulder of love and support. She pulled her arm back, her smile radiating pride and accomplishment, and let the hammer fly. The bell vibrated its call: that 18 rounds of chemotherapy that took nine months to complete had concluded. The reverberation of the toll was met with cheers, as those at the hospital knew that sound signaled not only an ending, but also a beginning.

“So, I have osteosarcoma,” she told her large group of friends and family in an Instagram post in August 2018.

“It’s a type of bone cancer in my femur. And I’m starting treatment immediately.”

At that time, her braided long, brown hair framed her angelic face like two exclamation points as she posted from her bed at the Nicklaus Children’s Hospital in Miami.

“One day I was a regular teenager who thought about taking the SAT, going to the next school dance, playing my guitar, singing and exercising. I felt fine, energetic and happy,” Annaleigh says.

“Then suddenly I had horrible pain and a little bump on my leg. I thought I’d just worked out way too hard. A few days later, I was a patient going through treatment and then surgery. It was a lot to take in,” she says.

Annaleigh Grilo and her mother, Debi, share a special bond and a special moment at Naples Botanical Garden.



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"I'm not saying that I didn't have a few tough moments, but through it all, I just knew I would be okay. I had faith."

Her mother, Debi, concurs.

"Annaleigh has always been a positive person, but her attitude throughout this ordeal has been truly amazing. She has faced each day with courage and determination.

"Her father and I wonder if her participation in live theater and concerts has helped her," she adds, because Annaleigh was accustomed to being on stage. She is experienced in techniques necessary to remain focused, confident and on target — skills that would assist her in her desire to remain positive while she tackled this issue.

"Although it's been a personal struggle, I think I'm actually a good person to have this thing happen to," she says. To substantiate the paradoxical statement, she adds, "I believe that everything happens for a reason

and that these things will help you grow. So, I had to find something good in this experience. Things don't happen just to cause you pain."

"There have been lots of positives that occurred during these trying months. I've learned to have fewer attachments to things and ideas, and to be more open to the path life actually takes, instead of the one I planned for," she explains. "Life can change so quickly and without warning. I embraced the changes that occurred and then knew I needed to conquer them."

Annaleigh's family and friends have become a consistent cushion of comfort, offering their support and love.

"I have become a lot closer to my older sister, Juliana, who goes to the University of Miami," Annaleigh adds. "My parents have loved me through everything, and my friends' visits are so important. I feel very blessed."

At 17 years of age, Annaleigh is once again focusing on her future. She was tutored at home through the 2018-19 school year, but she says, "I'm going to start my senior year of high school with everyone at Seacrest Day School in Naples. It may be a bit hard to get around in this wheelchair with my leg lifted for protection while I'm at school, but I'll be OK," she says. "I'm ready to refocus on high school and then college."

Those around her are inspired by Annaleigh's attitude of courage. Though she now lacks her long hair because of chemotherapy, her soft brown eyes illuminate a loving energy on the canvas of her lightly freckled face. Her beauty radiates and touches everyone she meets, like the toll of the bell that declared the end of 18 rounds of treatment and the beginning of her healing journey.

As of April 30, all her scans were clear of cancer. ☺

(Left) Juliana and Annaleigh Grilo years ago at a family wedding in France. "I have become a lot closer to my older sister, Juliana," Annaleigh says.

(Right) A Grilo family photo taken at Naples Botanical Garden: Debi, Juliana, Annaleigh and Pierre.