

In this together: Ambridge's Rich Cantolina fighting in the boxing ring as father fights cancer

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ROBINSON TWP. — Kathy Cantolina never read the letter. She can't even open it.

It's still tucked in its envelope, sitting alongside the many cards her husband received while he was in the hospital. Once, it contained a cornerman license, a gift from her son, Rich, to his father, Ricky. Now, it holds two promises: One kept, another to be determined.

Rich, an Ambridge graduate, gave the letter to Ricky last Christmas, shortly after the Cantolina family decided to forego Christmas presents. Ricky had been diagnosed with partial pancreatic cancer in September and they needed the money for medical bills. But one night, while sitting in Ricky's hospital room, Rich decided he wanted to give him something, anyway. He wanted to give him something to fight for.

An MMA fighter-turned-boxer, Rich decided to purchase a cornerman license for his father. He wrote him a letter, tucked the license inside and wrapped both in an envelope. Then, he gave it to Ricky on Christmas Eve. The first fight after Christmas, he wrote, would be Ricky's first in his corner. Then, at the bottom, he added his promises.

The next fight is going to be your first win as a cornerman.

One day you will corner me in a world championship fight.

“I don’t break my promises,” Rich said.

'I'm not supposed to be here'

On a muggy day in July, Rich’s parents made an appearance for his workout at Mark Cherico’s Martial Arts and Fitness Academy in Robinson Township. Ricky, dressed in a Team Cantolina T-shirt that matched Kathy’s, sat in the lobby and talked about his battle with cancer. Inside the gym, where Ricky’s eyes kept wandering, Rich alternated between training and interacting with his visitor and fan, a boy with Down syndrome he met during a recent fight.

“He’s doing very well for himself,” Ricky said. “I’m super proud of him in the ring and he’s come a long way, but I’m more proud of him for the man he is. He’s a good person. He’s got a very good heart.”

Ricky started getting sick in September of last year. He was diagnosed when his liver shut down, causing jaundice and an itching he said felt like a combination of chicken pox and poison ivy. In November, he underwent a whipple procedure during which surgeons removed his gallbladder as well as part of his pancreas, stomach and small intestine.

“My chances were really bad,” he said. “I’m not even supposed to be here.”

The doctors told Ricky they didn’t know if they would be able to get all the cancer, but he successfully made it through surgery. And, the day after his operation, he climbed out of bed into a chair because he’d heard older people shouldn’t stay lying down. A nurse forced him back in bed, but Ricky kept defying orders. Eventually, the hospital fitted him with a bright green wristband so people knew he wasn’t supposed to be on his feet.

Ricky, though, isn’t one to succumb to expectations, something he proved when he started to recover. When the doctors told him to start looking into social security or disability because he

wouldn't be able to go back to work, he responded by leaving the hospital before expected. By July, Ricky, an electrician by trade, had been back to work for two and a half months.

"I don't know anyone that could have the surgery that he had and push like he did to get better and be back to work," Kathy said. "Richie follows in his footsteps. He lost only one fight, and the next week he had to be back in there. He didn't want anything to hold him back. They are both very determined."

'He gave his entire life to us'

After Ricky's diagnosis and before the Christmas Eve letter, Rich was facing the prospect of his first fight without his father in the crowd.

He couldn't stop thinking about it as he warmed up in Toronto. Throughout Rich's life, Ricky had always been there. He would go into work early just so he could leave for whatever wrestling, baseball or soccer match one of his kids had that night. Whenever Rich or his older sister, Julie, had an event, Ricky made sure he could make it.

Growing up, it was something Rich admits he took for granted. It took Ricky and Kathy 10 years to have kids, an ordeal Kathy still can't talk about without tears in her eyes. After years of surgeries and medication, the Cantolinas finally had Julie. They called her their 'miracle baby,' and the doctor told them they would never have another child. Seven years later, they had Rich.

"When it takes you that long to get them," Kathy said, "I think you really treasure them."

Ricky would sit on the floor and play Barbie dolls with Julie. He took Rich to sporting events, hoisting him on his shoulders at boxing matches so he could see. He coached baseball and softball teams, often going to work in the middle of the night to make it on time. When Rich, whose body is now peppered with numerous tattoos, got his first one, Ricky signed the permission slip.

“He lived his life, he had his fun,” Rich said, “but when he had kids he gave his entire life to us. He sacrificed everything for us. Both of my parents, what they’ve given us, the amount of time they’ve spent with us our entire lives, it’s not what everyone gets in life.”

“From what I can see,” said Rich’s coach, Chris Williams, “they’re about as tight as you can be as a father and son.”

As it turned out, Rich didn't have to fight that night in Toronto without his father watching. Against all odds, Ricky showed up. Rich can still remember looking for him to hug in spite of himself and, suddenly, there he was. His first thought was that he couldn't let Ricky down after he made the trip.

He knocked his opponent out in 30 seconds.

'Get hit, get back up'

After his workout, Rich made his way to the lobby, stretching his safety green shoes out in front of him and taking off his sweatband. He paused often as he talked about his father, often having to speak through tears. He had no qualms about saying he’s an emotional person. He takes after Kathy that way. His sister is more like his even-tempered father.

His will to fight, though, that he gets from Ricky. It would be easy, he said, to sit at home and feel sorry for himself and his father. It would be easy to give up. But then he remembers his dad — tough attitude and calloused hands — and knows that’s not an option.

On work days, Rich wakes up at 4 a.m. to run. Then, he drives an hour and 15 minutes, over the Ohio border, for his day job as a safety engineer. After that, it’s straight to the gym. Sometimes, like that day in July, he’ll even squeeze in a softball game afterward. The routine comes with sacrifices: College time, social time, family time. But Rich has a promise to keep.

“I’ve had difficult times in the ring,” Rich said. “It’s never easy. It’s just like life with him. I think about that. I always remember to look back. I’ll be in the middle of the fight and I’ll look at him and remember this is nothing compared to what that man has done every day.

“Get hit, get back up. He’s done it every single day of his life since he was diagnosed. That’s what keeps my drive going. It’s in the back of my mind every day.”

Ricky, who dabbled with boxing in high school and during his time in the Navy, hasn’t missed a fight since his diagnosis. More than once, he would show up just a fight or two before Rich’s, watch his son and then leave because he was too sick. He had no strength. He could hardly walk.

But he always showed up.

“He’s like my hero,” Ricky said. “I knew it meant a lot to him when I was in his corner.”

“I think just seeing his dad every day is inspiring,” Williams said. “It’s inspiring for everyone, really. It’s his dad who he looks up to probably the most. He cornered for him in his last Pinnacle fight, and you could tell how much that meant to Richie. The times (Ricky) can be in the corner definitely gives (Rich) an extra spark.”

In May, Rich became a state Golden Gloves champion, knocking his opponent down three times in the first round before the referee called the fight.

“It was the best I ever felt in my life,” Rich said.

Afterward, he immediately turned to his corner and ran to Ricky. They embraced, repeating the same words over and over again: “We did it.”

Rich’s voice cracks when he talks about it now.

“That was my lifetime goal,” Rich said, “to be a Golden Gloves champion. That was a crazy accomplishment. To do that with him in my corner was the best moment of my life. I knew that was the beginning of something very special.”

'It was something to keep him going'

On July 23, Rick will fight in the Pinnacle Boxing Championships at Teamsters Hall in Lawrenceville. The day before, Rick goes in for his final round of 18 chemotherapy treatments. Afterward, the doctors will perform a scan and compare it to the baseline scan from before the treatments started. That’s when Rick will find out if the cancer returned.

“God willing they don’t see any difference.” Rick said. “And if they do, I got another fight on my hands.

“I’ll fight for every second of this I got left. That’s all you can do. I’m here for some kind of reason. Who knows? Maybe it’s to watch him get the world championship someday.”

On Ricky’s worst days, Kathy would ask Rich to call his father or send him a message. Rich always turned to boxing, often having someone film him at practice. He would send Ricky the video or show up at the house, asking what he was doing wrong.

There would be a spark in Ricky’s eye then.

A smile.

“It was something to keep him going,” Rich said. “Boxing, him being my cornerman, it was something to keep him going, keep him fighting, keep him looking toward the next day.

“He's there for my fight, and I'm there for his.”