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Overcoming adversity: Mother, daughter strengthen each other through running and writing

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BY AMANDA CREASEY ON JULY 10, 2018

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At first glance, Anne and Madison Braswell appear to be the typical mother-daughter duo. Through their bright smiles and successes, one would be hard-pressed to imagine the hardships they have faced.

North Carolina natives, their family relocated in June 2010, when Anne's husband, Madison's father, accepted a job in Chester. On the outside, the family's life appeared idyllic. Anne's husband had secured a good job, while Anne took care of their two children, Madison and her older brother Blake. The picture-perfect family of four purchased a home not far from Pocahontas State Park. They were living the dream. But a difficult past hummed beneath the happy surface, and a challenging future lay ahead—both of which have served to make mother and daughter stronger.

While they were living in North Carolina, Anne and Madison lost two very dear family members within five weeks: Anne's mother and Madison's oldest brother, Matthew, 18. Prior to these losses, Anne and her husband had also suffered the loss of their 1-year-old daughter, Kaitlin.

More upheaval followed. "We had to leave North Carolina, where we had lived our whole lives," she said. Madison was 10 at the time. The changes were not easy for Anne, but "my greatest loss was the complete sense of family." With the deaths of her infant daughter, teen-aged son and mother, Anne felt completely adrift. She wasn't alone; Madison felt the pain as well.

In an attempt to help Madison adjust to her new life, her parents "surprised her with a beautiful puppy, Sophie." Anne explains they wanted "to help her grieve the loss of her brother and grandmother." The plan backfired, however, when "Sophie was hit by a car at age 3, which greatly added to Madison's grief."

It might be difficult to imagine that after the loss of two children, a parent and a puppy, more hardships would follow, but the family endured a further challenge: divorce.

"After my parents divorced, my mother and I began a new life with Chloe, our new puppy," Madison said. "This allowed me to begin to feel like [I had] a family again."

Anne was able to find a job to help support them, and the two women forged a strong, albeit small, family. "Mom and I became very close," Madison said. Anne added, "I don't know how I would have gotten through these horrific losses without her. She helped me focus on moving forward and finding a way to survive in a healthy manner. She encouraged me to run in memory of Matthew."

Running was a way for Anne to memorialize not only her oldest son, but also her mother. "He ran cross country and track in middle school and a year in high school," she said of Matthew. "My mom was described as a fast runner, so

a common thread between them was running." Anne began her own running journey the week after her son's death in 2010. She later joined a 10K training team and completed the Monument Avenue 10K.

"It went pretty well, and before I knew it, I had progressed to running marathons," Anne said. "My first marathon qualified me to run the Boston Marathon." In the past five years, she has qualified to run the marquee Boston event three times but never done it. Next year she plans to if she qualifies.

Although Madison never enjoyed running the way her mother does, she dealt with her grief through writing. "She would go outside and write beautiful poems about her brother," Anne said. She also used her talent to support Anne in her running endeavors. "One time before a marathon, she wrote down a lot of inspirational sentences encouraging me."

The challenges Anne and Madison have faced could have left them with scars and self-pity, but both feel stronger for their experiences.

"We are much closer because we became dependent on each other for the family that we longed to have," Anne said. She found the strength to carry on in her desire to be a role model for Madison. "I want her to see her mom as someone that, despite her feelings of sadness and loneliness, chose to not give in to them. I want her to see me as someone who fought to be strong and move forward," Anne said.

This fall, the family will face another change: Madison's move to Blacksburg to study business and marketing at Virginia Tech.

While she is "extremely proud and happy for her," Anne said, "I will feel lost at times. My goal is to continue to make her a priority, but to also begin a life of my own that I can feel good about. I plan on focusing on a career pathway and continuing healthy choices, such as running and cycling."

Although at times Anne and Madison have been tempted to allow sorrow and grief to bury any sense of hope, they instead found strength and purpose in each other.

"Madison gave me life," Anne said. "She gave me a reason to fight and not give into my pain." Because of their ability to lean on and support each other, both women have found ways to move forward and stay strong—as individuals and as a family.

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