

CLASS OF '00 PROFILE:

Danielle Liubicich & Margot (Gallowitsch) Puerta: Stags united for breast cancer awareness

BY CAROLYN ARNOLD

A family history of breast cancer and the knowledge that there are genetic links to certain types of cancer prompted Danielle Liubicich '00 to undergo the genetic testing that would tell her if her genes put her at greater risk for the disease. “My grandmother is a survivor of both breast and ovarian cancer,” said Liubicich, now assistant professor of biology at the University of San Francisco. “She’s an incredibly strong woman to have made it through both.”

For the testing, Liubicich was referred to a special cancer center; a simple blood test was all that was needed. A few weeks later, she met with a genetic counselor to discuss the results and was told that she was considered to be at high risk for the disease.

“It was tough to hear this news, but it has opened doors for me. There are things I can do to reduce my chances of developing it,” she said. The very next day, Liubicich participated in her first Avon Walk for Breast Cancer.

Not long afterward, Liubicich teamed up with fellow classmate Margot (Gallowitsch) Puerta '00, managing editor of the biomedical publication *Molecular Medicine* and director of Laboratory Operations at The Feinstein Institute for Medical Research in



Former roommates Danielle Liubicich '00 (right) and Collette Collins '00 at the finish line for the 2008 Avon Walk in New York.

New York. Puerta asked Liubicich to participate in a podcast discussing genetic testing and the Genetic Information Nondiscrimination Act (GINA), a federal law that protects consumers from discrimination by health insurers and employers on the basis of genetic information. GINA has strengthened existing safeguards by limiting insurers' ability to use genetic information to raise rates for groups, and by extending protections to individual health insurance plans.

“The new GINA legislation was passed last year, and it was important that the lay public know and understand what this law does and how it protects them,” said Puerta, who knew Liubicich from their days of

struggling through biology classes together. “That’s when I thought it would be great to interview Danielle.”

Puerta’s podcast includes information on GINA, genetic testing, and Liubicich’s personal story. It was transmitted in October and can be accessed at <http://www.molmed.org/podcast.html>.

Now that GINA has passed, people who may have been wary about getting tested can be at ease, knowing they are protected from discrimination by employers or insurers.

“Getting genetic testing is a choice everyone must make for himself or herself,” Liubicich reflected. “I’m glad I know my status and can take preventative steps. The information empowers me to take a very proactive and positive approach to my health.”

Liubicich has remained very active in raising funds for breast cancer through charity walks, cycling events, and triathlons — often with her former roommate from Fairfield, Colette Collins '00. This past October she participated in the sixth annual Avon Walk for Breast Cancer in New York, which raised \$11.5 million. ■