

Amber's mother has a message on death

By BILL LAZARUS
Staff Reporter

SHELTON — The scene was a tranquil one. Patti Calistro Stiewing sat on her couch and nursed her 1-year-old son, Toby, for a few minutes before putting him on the floor. Outside the cottage, the Housatonic River lapped by, the sun shone and a soft breeze flicked through the surrounding trees.

On the table, however, lay a black notebook containing pictures which destroyed any illusion of peace. They showed a young girl fighting for her life. A huge, blood-red tumor had grown on the right side of her head.

There was one photo at the end of the collection particularly graphic. It presented the body of the girl, pale and wrapped in blankets, lying in the back of the family station wagon on the way to the hospital to be officially declared dead.

"People are afraid to face the realistic parts of life," Stiewing said as she pointed out the photos. Not her. The Los Angeles native took the pictures in 1980 as her daughter, Amber, struggled against cancer and lost.

This August, Stiewing expects to go one step further. She is working on a detailed account of Amber's 15-month battle with the disease. Some of the pictures will be included in the book, along with portions of a journal Stiewing kept.

"While the whole thing was happening, I had this book in mind," she said. Work began slowly, but has picked up speed. A publisher has been contacted. Elisabeth Kubler-Ross, a recognized world authority on death and dying, is providing guidance.

The book is a major break from Stiewing's past. She is actually a graphic artist. To save money on babysitting for Toby, she and her husband, Gary, a shipbuilder, work on different days of the week.

When she is home, she writes. However, the book is not a way to redirect her emotions. Stiewing no longer cries. She did that while Amber suffered and after the 4½-year-old died. And the slim,

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outgoing woman with short, brunette hair cried again when she played some of the 50 tapes made during Amber's final days.

The tears have stopped. Now, there is just determination left.

"There are politics involved in cancer. Doctors and scientists are fighting. And people are dying while they argue. With my last breath, I'm going to try to stop that from happening," Stiewing said firmly.

She was involved with those disputes from the first. Concerned that the chemotherapy and radiation treatments were not helping her daughter, Stiewing took Amber to the Grand Bahamas to participate in a controversial, and ultimately

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unsuccessful, cancer treatment program available there.

There are other reasons for the book, too. Stiewing, 29, would like to create a program for children about life and death based on Amber's experience. She is already a facilitator for the New Haven-area section of Compassionate Friends, a support group for bereaved families.

She has a message for them that per-

vades everything. "Death is wonderful," Stiewing said. "Life is wonderful, too, but don't be afraid to leave life."

Finally, she wants to create a foundation from any money she receives from book sales to assist people with problems. Stiewing envisions altruistic projects to help relieve world suffering.

For 15 months, she learned how the desperate people of this world feel. Only at the end was there any relief. "At Amber's death, I felt warmth, peace and joy. I knew God was there," Stiewing said.

She tried to forget by working on various projects. Frustrated by a lack of success in Milford, Stiewing and her husband, Gary, moved to Shelton with his son, Todd, now 7. "Todd's presence sort of reminded me of what I had," she said.

Toby's birth helped change some of her feelings. "It was a wonderful experience to mother again," Stiewing said. "All of my motherly energy was stopped up." "When I was pregnant, I began to grieve again," Stiewing said. "I worked through it."

She had to. In her tiny home — Toby could crawl from one end to another in just a few moments — there's no choice. Reminders of Amber are everywhere.

On one wall, there is a large black ink drawing of Amber. Her unused ballet toe shoes lie in a box against another wall. And there are hundreds of letters and cards from people who heard about Amber and wanted to help or console.

There is even a little hint of Amber herself. Although the body was cremated and the ashes scattered along the Long Island Sound, Stiewing retained a few bits for herself.

And there are the tapes, the journal and, of course, the photos.

They are far more than relics from the past. They are reminders, goading Stiewing to take her message to the world.

Only then, only when that mission is completed will Amber — or her mother — really be at rest.



Staff Photo by MIKE O'BRIEN

Patti Calistro Stiewing says her one-year-old son Toby helped her deal with her daughter Amber's