



Angela (left) &
me as children



13th December 2021

Dear Reader,

“If you don’t look after your asthma, you will go the same way as your sister...” my consultant said.

Those words haunted me during that hospital stay, my first since my older sister Angela had died from a sudden serious asthma attack just months earlier – her first ever.

I had never thought that I could die from asthma until I lost my sister to the illness in October 1993, even though I had been in and out of the Emergency Room myself every six weeks or so with repeated asthma attacks from the age of eleven.

That day, those words from the consultant hit me. I felt like an elephant had just stood on my chest. I realised how important my lungs were and what they had gone through to survive all those years of fighting for my breath – frequent Intensive Care visits, prolonged in-patient stays in hospital and even being ventilated to keep me alive on one occasion.

One thing I try to remember is: “Reach One. Teach One”. I want my story to reach out and help teach patients or carers how to live with asthma, so that asthma does not control their lives. **The Asthma Society “reach” and “teach” parents and carers every day but they need your help and your donations to continue that work.**

My big sister Angela was a social butterfly. She loved nothing better than a fun night out with her friends but that fatal night in October 1993 was to be her last party. It is still hard to write that sentence. While out playing laser tag as part of her birthday celebrations, she had a severe asthma attack from running around a smoke-filled room and she collapsed in the bathroom and died. She was only 26 years old.



Angela a few weeks
before she died

In the years prior to Angela’s death, hospitals had been my second home and nursing staff had frequently acted as my carers. My parents had been forced to learn to spot the warning signs of my asthma, needing to identify when I was in big trouble, when I couldn’t breathe and when an ambulance was urgently needed.

After Angela died, leaving behind a devastated family and me to carry on as her little sister, the consultant’s words made it obvious to me. The doctor was right – I couldn’t “go the same way” as my sister, I had to change and learn for myself. It was my job to protect my lungs, rather than take them for granted. I found a new survival mode - understanding my own symptoms and triggers became like learning to fine-tune a grand piano.

As a family, we only wish that we had known about the Asthma Society back then. There are days when I do wonder about what that support could have done for Angela – maybe my sister would still be alive today if that help had been available to us.

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That is why I am asking you to give an ongoing or one-off gift to support the vital services provided by the Asthma Society. Their nursing team, their awareness-building and their work to advocate for improved asthma services is so important. They need our support, our donations and our voices as patients to stop asthma deaths in Ireland.

My biggest asthma learning came from educating myself on how to know my own asthma triggers and how to identify the changes in my own lungs. Learning to recognise when I was deteriorating was key to getting my life back.

As a patient, it's harder to manage asthma triggers in Winter, but it's also the most important time of the year to be in charge of your asthma.

The things that work for me in Winter - maybe you might find these useful too:

1. **I always take my preventative inhaler – every single day.** I tell myself this is the equivalent of keeping your lungs toned for an asthma patient.
2. **I wrap up well to minimise cold air as a trigger and I'm particularly careful to protect my chest.** I put an extra layer under my jumper and cover my mouth with a scarf to warm up the cold air before it hits my lungs.
3. **I don't socialise in houses that are smoky** and I ask people to smoke outside if they are coming to my home over the Christmas period.
4. **I've always asked people to open windows to minimise the changes of catching a viral illness** - that's even more important now during the pandemic. Social distancing, hand-washing and wearing a mask are also key.
5. **I watch out for seasonal triggers** – like festive pot pourri, scented candles, sometimes real Christmas trees can even trigger an attack for me.
6. **I meditate. This really helps me chill out and keep a calm head.** Stress can be an asthma trigger so a calm mental oasis is key for Winter Wellness.
7. **I think the advice that Ruth (the Asthma Society nurse) gives and the Top Ten Tips leaflet in this Winter Wellness Support Pack are brilliant. I'm taking them on for myself!**

All this Winter Wellness and asthma management initially seemed like work and then seemed like freedom. Getting medication right was fine-tuning a grand piano so it can play the right sound. Getting to know my own symptoms and my body's response to asthma triggers made the whole thing into a symphony.

When I created my bucket list before my asthma was controlled, I wanted to get on a helicopter. I wanted to fly a glider plane. I wanted to ride a horse. With the right self-management of my asthma in recent years, I was able to do all those. Because of that, approaching my 50s, I'm creating a whole new bucket list – I'm thinking the Camino in Spain, climbing up to the Blue Cross in a pilgrimage to Medjugorje and, for the craic, to zipline down the Vegas strip.

My sister Angela's parting gift to me was letting me know that I should get out there – just live every day of my life. I'd love my mantra of Reach One: Teach One to reach you as you read this – as a person with asthma or a carer to a person with asthma – you too can get the most out of life when asthma is controlled. Your first step to getting that control can start now, with this Winter Wellness Support Pack as your call to action.

The Asthma Society will be there for you on your asthma management journey, step by step, as they are for so many patients. **Please donate to support the work they do, that donation could help another patient to write a whole new bucket list, just like me.**

Yours Sincerely,

Colet



Asthma management has helped me feel on top of the world



Me aged 30 flying a small plane - one off the bucket list!



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