

Cancer Research: Honoring a Mother's Memory



Helen Biernat (far right), shown here as a young woman with her softball team, was a lifelong inspiration to her son, Donald.

When **Donald Biernat** walked into the UIC College of Nursing in 2006, it wasn't to study nursing or because he had an affiliation with the College. He had no reason to be there, except that his mother, **Helen Biernat**, had recently died after a long and painful battle with breast cancer, and he wanted to fund breast cancer research.

His first gift enabled two graduate students to continue their research into the early screening and detection of breast cancer in younger women. A paper based on their findings has just been published in the *Journal of Midwifery & Women's Health*. Since 2006, Biernat has made additional gifts to

the College in memory of his mother, each time designating that the funds support nursing students involved in cancer research.

"Don Biernat gives from his heart," says **Nancy Herman**, director of advancement. "We at the College are so pleased that we can help him honor the life and memory of Helen Biernat."

Biernat knows what it means to overcome obstacles and never quit; he learned that lesson, and the importance of compassion, from his mother.

Helen Biernat, born and raised on the near southwest side of Chicago, was the daughter of Polish immigrants who struggled to make a living. Helen had wanted to become a nurse, but she was never able to realize that dream. After her husband's unexpected death at the age of 42, she worked whatever jobs she could find to support her four young children.

During her teen years, Helen played sports at Whittier Playground, including softball, which she played professionally for a time; she passed on her love for the Chicago playgrounds to her children. Donald built his career advancing sports in the Chicago Public School system, first at Emmet Playground and then at Pickard Elementary School, in the neighborhood where he grew up.

From the late 1970s through the 1980s, Biernat wrote to sports team owners and countless others to share his dream of opening the Inner City Sports Museum of Chicago, dedicated to role

models and heroes that would help keep inner city kids in school and out of gangs. Donations of bats, balls, helmets, and signed photographs became part of his "Don't Quit" program to celebrate the lives of people who overcame obstacles on their way to fame.

After a lengthy fight with cancer, Helen passed away on March 22, 2005, at the age of 89. "My mom gave me opportunity," says Biernat. "I want to continue that by giving opportunities to UIC College of Nursing students."

— Felicia Schneiderhan

Honor a Loved One by Supporting the College of Nursing

Commemorative gifts are a thoughtful way to honor or memorialize a loved one while supporting a cause you believe in.

Your gift can establish an endowment, fund a scholarship, or help support other projects. There are several ways to establish a memorial gift, including:

- Making an outright gift at any time;
- Making a bequest in your will to provide funding after your lifetime;
- Setting up an endowment to fund a special program or project in perpetuity.

To learn more about making a commemorative gift, contact Nancy Herman, director of advancement, at 312.996.1736 or nherman@uic.edu.