

She Uses Her Training – And Grief – to **Fight Flu**

By *Renée K. Gadoua*

The last time Serese Marotta '99 talked with her 5-year-old son, Joseph, they discussed Halloween plans. "He wanted a Star Wars costume, maybe a storm trooper," she said. Joseph had been hospitalized nine days earlier with flu symptoms: cough, lethargy, vomiting. As the two chatted, Joseph's blood pressure plummeted. Doctors and nurses scrambled to stabilize his heart rate, but minutes later, the cheerful little boy who loved Legos, Transformers and Spider-Man died. His was one of 288 flu-related U.S. pediatric deaths in the 2009-10 flu season.

Until the last frantic hours of Joseph's life, "there was no sense of urgency, no sense he was at death's door," Marotta said. "As an educated, attentive parent I had no idea how dangerous flu was."

Marotta, a 1999 ESF graduate in environmental and forest biology and a former environmental scientist, draws on her scientific training and personal grief to deliver public health messages about seasonal flu. It's not just a cold, she tells people. It can kill, and the annual vaccine is the best tool to fight it. Since May 2016, she has served as chief operating officer of Families Fighting Flu (FFF), a national education and advocacy organization based in Arlington, Virginia.

"I knew this was the platform to honor Joseph, to make something good out of tragedy," she said.

She began volunteering with FFF about six months after Joseph died Oct. 18, 2009. She now leads the group, working out of her Baldwinsville, New York, home, where she lives with her husband, Joe, and their 16-year-old daughter, Emma. Joe Marotta, an IT professional, serves on FFF's board.

Marotta grew up in Cicero, near Syracuse, and ESF was a natural fit for her. "I was always outside playing with snakes and frogs," she



Serese Marotta '99 holds a photograph of her son, Joseph.

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said. “There was a pond on one side of the house and a swamp on the other. I loved nature.”

After graduating, she worked 16 years for Arcadis (formerly Blasland, Bouck & Lee), an international consulting company with an office in Syracuse. She traveled frequently to work on projects including health risk assessments of big river systems, flora and fauna surveys, and wetlands delineations. As her career shifted to human health and ecological risk assessment, Marotta sharpened her data reporting and analyzing skills—tools that serve her well in explaining the science behind vaccines.

She learned to rely on data to assess a situation, such as determining if chemicals threatened the ecosystem of a site. “We were confident we were adhering to our scientific standards and being good stewards of the environment,” she said.

When explaining the flu, she said, “We talk about clinical trials and everything those vaccines have to go through before they come to market.” But many people want more than science. “Vaccination is an emotional issue for most people. I can talk about data all day long and it’s not going to comfort them,” she said. “I want them to know, emotionally, as a parent I understand.”

The Marotta family moved to Ohio in 2006. In fall 2009, Joseph was in kindergarten and Emma, 7, was in second grade. Marotta took them to their pediatrician for the flu mist vaccine at the end of September.

Earlier that year, U.S. health officials had declared a public health emergency, as cases of the so-called swine flu (H1N1 flu strain) emerged in Mexico, Canada and the United States. After the 2009 flu pandemic began, federal health officials recommended people receive a second shot that contained the H1N1 strain. That second vaccine was not yet available in Dayton, Ohio, in September. Two weeks after Joseph died, it became available.

An autopsy found that Joseph had developed a duodenal ulceration as a result of H1N1 influenza; that slowly eroded his intestinal tract until it ruptured. He died of complications of H1N1 and septic shock. “The flu virus had gotten into his intestinal tract,” she explained. “He also had pneumonia in the lower left lobe of his lung.”

Marotta has told the story dozens of times, appearing in media outlets including The Washington Post, Good Housekeeping and NBC’s “Today.”

In addition to media interviews, she writes grants to support educational programs and builds relationships with government agencies including the Center for Disease Control and Prevention and industry partners such as GlaxoSmithKline, Astra-Zeneca, Sanofi and Seqirus.

FFF provides educational resources, such as posters for doctors’ offices, schools and community organizations. The organization maintains active social media accounts, posting reminders to get the flu vaccine, weekly flu updates and family stories. About 3,000 people subscribe to FFF’s weekly alerts and quarterly newsletter.

She is one of three staff members, and she works with 12 board members and 12 medical advisers. She, her husband and other volunteers provide emotional support to grieving families. Sharing family stories is central to FFF’s strategy. “We’re just regular moms and dads and sisters and brothers and aunts and uncles,” she said. “It could happen to any one of us.”

Marotta energetically answered questions in a large, bright kitchen decorated with block letters that spell FAMILY, HOPE and FAITH. She mostly ignored her buzzing phone, grabbing it once to check if her daughter needed a ride home.

Emma, a high school junior, sometimes helps with FFF mailings or filing. “She’s busy with school and keeping her grades up and track and starting the college search,” Marotta said. “She just wants to be normal.”

A photo shows Joseph at 4 and Emma at 6, in a sunflower field in Ohio. “They were best friends,” she said. “He was her buddy.”

The Marottas returned to the Syracuse area in 2012. An upstairs bedroom houses her office. A floor-to-ceiling mural of trees decorates her meditation room, where some of Joseph’s ashes rest inside an urn.

“I won’t lie,” she said. “There are days that are difficult. I reach my capacity on the flu. I don’t want to hear one more tragic story or share my story. But I have to keep going. It’s the scientist in me and the grieving mother wanting to make sense of it and help prevent it from happening to another family.”

Renée K. Gadoua is a freelance writer and editor in the Syracuse area.



For more information about Families Fighting Flu visit www.familiesfightingflu.org.