



Janine De Tillio Cammarata

Finding Strength and a Mission to Help Others During Darkness

COVER STORY

By Jenna Caputo | Photos by Super Source Media and the Cammarata Family

Janine De Tillio Cammarata has been a fighter since day one. Born as a premie at 3 lbs. 14 oz. in a time without all the technological advances of today, the doctors did not expect her to survive, but her dad believed otherwise. He refused to let the priest give her the last rites. "He said I would live and called me Adam Ant, because I was little, but strong," remembers Janine. "I think my birth set the stage for the rest of my life. So much has been thrown at me, but I keep plowing through."

Born in Smithtown, Long Island, Janine was the third out of four siblings. She was physically and emotionally bullied. "I wore glasses

since I was three, and back then that was a perfect reason for kids to tease me," she says. "Before my brother entered middle school, my parents decided we needed a safer place to live." So the family moved to Greenville, NY when Janine was seven years old. Growing up, Janine always enjoyed reading, exploring in the woods, riding her bicycle and dirt bike, listening to music and doing jigsaw puzzles. The puzzling began when she was nine years old and laid up with a broken leg. "My extended family and I are extremely klutzy," says Janine. "Luckily, my mom is a nurse and my sister continues the tradition!"

She was a shy and introspective child, so she often kept to herself

and could spend hours working on puzzles, the more challenging the better. She would wait for her father to come home from traveling for work to put the last piece in together. Her father was her biggest hero, and sadly she lost him to lung cancer when he was only 57 years old.

Janine attended The College of Saint Rose for both her undergraduate and graduate degrees, majoring in English Literature with a specialty in medieval literature, and a minor in Political Science. She always had a creative flair, but wasn't originally intent on pursuing writing. Her medieval literature professor suggested she write fiction, and although she dabbled in it here and there, she didn't



Janine teaching a journaling workshop

seriously pursue the profession until later in life.

The day after fracturing her shin and breaking her toe, Janine met her husband, Lucas, on a blind date. "I was on crutches, so he knew what he was getting into right from the beginning!" she jokes. "It was love at first sight. I knew I would marry him as soon as I set eyes on him." Three years later, they married and happened to be riding their motorcycles around Clifton Park when they saw a house for sale. They fell in love with it and have been in the area ever since.

They had two sons – Nick and Stephen. Unfortunately, tragedy struck just as Nick was turning 13 years old. He was diagnosed with Acute Lymphoblastic Leukemia on July 4, 2008. He passed away on October 26, 2008. Their family was left reeling from this tragic loss and struggled to make sense of the situation and what they should do next. "Nick was a vivacious, enthusiastic and caring boy. It was a terrible, devastating illness for him, but he always smiled and kept others positive," says Janine. "We were lost as a family and I couldn't function. There were a lack of services and support for someone at Nick's age while in the hospital. Nick would have been the first person to help someone else, so we decided to start a foundation that would financially and emotionally support all children battling cancer at The Bernard and Millie Duker Children's Hospital Melodies Center in Albany Med."

Many of these children and their families have to travel an hour or more



Janine helping out during the Family Connections program

every day to get their treatment. The process is draining both emotionally and financially. Nick's Fight to be Healed Foundation helps to reduce their stress, assisting with the bills and also with emotional support through their Family Connections program. Through the use of yoga/ meditation and journaling, Family Connections provides a safe space for families to come together, share their stories, receive support and find help with the resulting PTSD, survivor's guilt and challenges with transitioning away from the hospital that many of these children go through.

In addition to the support they provide these families, the foundation has been able to donate almost \$1 million over the last 10 years to local families and The Melodies Center. There are always opportunities for

volunteers to help as well, through blood drives, fundraising events or collecting supplies.

In constant pursuit of healing and helping others, Janine has focused her energies back to her writing. After Nick's death, she had a hard time connecting with the world with a grief much too big for her to handle. The world of literature came to her rescue when she read the book, *The Art of Racing in the Rain*, by Garth Stein. The words of the dog, Enzo, resonated deeply with her – "What you manifest is before you." She realized that she could either let her grief slowly destroy her or she could bring good and healing into the world. She wanted to use her writing to not only open the door to her grief, but to share it so others could connect and know that hope is always an option.

She explains: "I write middle grade and young adult fantasy that softens the harshness of reality and takes our youth on a journey toward deep friendships, strong values and hope in their future. I come to my writing from a place of healing and the belief that words can transform a person's life. A book may be pure entertainment that makes us laugh, cringe in fear, smile and escape. If the time is right, books

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can also transform, heal and soothe. The need to heal as well as empower another to make a difference in their own life and the world is what drives my writing. It's cathartic and is a connection to my son, no matter what I write."

Her current series, *The Puzzle Quests*, begins with *Shimmer's Eggs* – the story of 11-year-old Luke, who longs for an adventure to escape being sick in the hospital. As a medieval princess and her dragon come to life from his jigsaw puzzle, he doesn't know what to believe. When she grants him and his little brother, Peter, a wish in exchange for their help, they can't afford to say no, and they are thrown into an adventure in another world on their great quest. The second book, *Saving Atlantis*, was released in 2018. Book three in the series, *Sketchy Dinosaurs*, is due out this year.

Janine also has a young adult series, *The Fianna Cycle*; and a non-fiction book, *What Makes Them Amazing: Inspiring Stories of Young Adults Battling Cancer*. Partial proceeds from all her books are donated to the foundation and given to newly diagnosed families.

Janine teaches creative writing to elementary and middle school students through the BOCES program and at the Clifton Park-Halfmoon Public Library, as well as a journaling workshop for healing and self-awareness, also at the library. In



Stephen, Janine & Lucas during the 2018 Nick's Ride to be Healed

addition to her writing and other work, Janine is a Baptiste Inspired yoga instructor, a third degree black belt martial arts instructor, and is a sucker for karaoke.

Her advice for anyone thinking of pursuing writing is simply to write what you love. Write what rings true to you. "Know what's important and stick to it," she says. "Write because you have something to say and can't imagine doing anything else. Also, sit in a chair and get it done. I write daily in a journal, in addition to my creative writing. Self-inquiry allows you to get

"Every day we are faced with adversity, tragedy, loss and sadness, but there's also joy, love, compassion and acts of kindness. We have the power to choose how we will show up every day. You never know how your positive attitude can affect another person. I choose to share hope and give to others through my writing and foundation. I know Nick would have done the same."

to the heart of your writing and you never know what will show up."

Family is the most important aspect of Janine's life. Lucas is a Cyber Security Technical Solutions Architect for Cisco Systems and enjoys playing soccer. Stephen, now 21, is a senior at Johnson and Wales University in Providence, studying Business Administration. He participated in travel soccer for years. Their family also includes two rescue dogs: Zoey Shadow (10), a white Akita and black lab mix, and Dakota Kenny (8), a black lab, shepherd and mix. Janine loves walking the dogs, attending farmers' markets, and visiting independent bookstores. She and her family enjoy riding their motorcycles looking for "gem spots."

Janine says her two biggest passions in life are *family* and *hope*.

They are an open arms type of family that is fiercely loyal not only to their family by blood, but family by choice as well. They have large, boisterous family gatherings that include lots of food and laughter. Humor has helped them through their darkest times.

As for hope, Janine is passionate about using her experience to help others. "Losing my oldest son almost killed me. Even with another child, I couldn't imagine living the rest of my life without part of my soul. Some days I still can't. Losing a child is a lifelong journey through grief. It doesn't go away. You don't get over it. Having compassion for myself has been the toughest part of living with loss. I'm not the same person I was before I lost Nick and that's ok. Through journaling, yoga and family/community support, I have found ways to walk with my grief. My passion is to share hope with others through my words. I want people to know that no matter where you are there is hope. Showing love, compassion and empathy to others are ways to kindle hope. My writing is my passion. Nick's Fight to be Healed is my mission."

For more information on how you can help Nick's Fight to be Healed, visit www.fighttobehealed.org. For more information on Janine and her books, visit www.janinedetilliocammarata.com. ■

Do you know a neighbor who has a story to share? Nominate your neighbor to be featured in one of our upcoming issues!

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