

Dedicated to a dream
Courage of cancer victim draws brother to charity in race toward a cure
Monday, January 30, 2006
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THE COLUMBUS DISPATCH

FAMILY PHOTOS

Perez with sister Vicki, whose 11-year battle with the disease ended in 2002. A young Miguel with a photo of his beloved big sister

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Miguel Perez: "I am more than willing to use whatever talents I have to help cure breast cancer."

Early in life, Miguel Perez attached himself to his big sister like a shadow.

The youngest of five children insisted on having his picture taken with Vicki before she left for school dances; he cried when she became engaged.

"Those two had a special bond," recalled his older brother, Luis. "With their 12-year age difference, she was like a second mother to him."

Years later, circumstances reversed the roles — transforming Vicki Speakman's shadow into a guiding light.

In 1995, with his sister battling a recurrence of breast cancer, Perez relinquished a show-business dream in New York, returning to the Columbus area to help care for his idol until the disease stole her in June 2002.

The ordeal ignited a passion: This month, Perez was elected the first male president of the 15-member board of directors for Komen Columbus — the foundation best-known for its signature annual fundraiser, Race for the Cure.

"I am doing this for her," the Grandview Heights native said. "Every decision I make will be on her behalf. Her memory will drive me through this new responsibility."

The two-year appointment was no surprise within the cancer charity.

"We didn't think of him as the first man; we thought of him as Miguel," former President Susan Brown said. "He has been around, and we all love him."

The board expects Perez, owner of a production company in the Short North, to raise the Komen Columbus profile.

"He has tremendous communications and marketing skills," board member Sue

Jones said. "He already has revamped our Web site and started a newsletter."

The foundation awarded almost \$750,000 last year to central Ohio programs and services, but many potential recipients are unaware of the funding.

"Nobody I work with even knows that they can apply to Komen Columbus for grants," said Doug Knutson, an assistant professor of family medicine at Ohio State University.

More than just a race sponsor, the organization distributes educational materials, operates a speakers' bureau and teams with other groups on breastcancer causes.

"Komen Columbus has grown so fast," Perez said. "One of my main goals is to help us catch up to that growth."

Perez, who has volunteered with the charity for five years and served on the board for 18 months, runs in Race for the Cure and recruits almost 200 participants a year.

Started in 1993, the 5-kilometer event drew 900 entrants and raised \$50,000 that year. Last year, 26,000 runners and walkers swarmed Downtown to raise \$1.2 million.

Meanwhile, the Komen Columbus service area has expanded from seven to 23 counties.

Jones praised Perez's "tenacity, perseverance and desire" — traits he demonstrated during his sister's 11-year struggle with cancer.

He accompanied his sister's husband, Michael, and other family members to dozens of chemotherapy treatments throughout her cycle of remissions and recurrences.

"I don't think he missed one," said Luis Perez, assistant general manager of the Ohio State Fair and Ohio Expo Center.

After graduating from Ohio State University in 1989, Miguel Perez taught school in Columbus for three years before moving to New York.

Early in his sister's cancer fight, he traveled back and forth from New York to Columbus to attend her treatment sessions.

He landed a bit part in a soap opera and was beginning to receive audition calls when his sister's condition drew him home.

He returned to Columbus in late 1995, shortly before she entered the Arthur G. James Cancer Hospital for a one-month stay for a bone-marrow transplant, including 96 consecutive hours of chemotherapy.

"It was tough for him to abandon his dream," Luis said, "but I don't think he thought twice about it. He came back here for his family, and I can tell you that he has never regretted his decision."

When his sister was too ill to work, Miguel taught her Spanish class at his alma mater, Grandview Heights High School.

His niece, one of two Speakman children, was one of his students.

"All of my friends thought he was a cool teacher and loved being in his classroom," Katie Speakman said. "He was like a male version of my mom."

Outside the classroom, he applied his artistic talent to boost the school theater program.

In 1997, he directed *Guys and Dolls*, the high school's first spring musical in 27 years.

"We had packed houses for every performance, and it got people all fired up about the theater," recalled Christie Kaufman, president of the vocal-music boosters at the time.

Perez directed two more hits — *Hello, Dolly!* and *Damn Yankees* — and helped re-establish a tradition.

The city honored him with an appreciation day in 2001, and the high school last year invited him to address National Honor Society members.

In his speech, he credited his sister's courage for helping him to resist despair and turn his grief into "something positive."

Speakman defied doctors by raising her arms overhead hours after her mastectomy in 1991.

She walked in *Race for the Cure* two weeks after her bonemarrow transplant in 1996.

And she greeted Miguel and other relatives at the finish line during the 2002 race — 16 days before she died.

In her final days, the 48-yearold mother of two looked at her baby brother without fear and said: "It's weird. I don't feel like I'm dying."

Such resilience is characteristic of a family that has spent a lifetime coping with heartache.

Miguel and Vicki's parents, Rosa and Alberto Perez Sr., lost almost everything when they fled Fidel Castro's Cuba in 1960 to begin anew in the United States. They carried \$135 and one suitcase of clothes.

After a day in Miami, they were summoned by an uncle to Columbus — where Alberto, a wealthy factory owner while in Cuba, began loading trucks on his way to a 33-year career with Pepsi.

Cancer claimed the lives of two Perez children, Alberto Jr. and Jorge, both at age 7.

During his sister's illness, Perez worked with his siblings to shield their parents from the gravity of Vicki's prognosis.

"They had already lost their home, their business, their country and their sons," he said. "Vicki's biggest concern was protecting them."

Eighteen months before her daughter's death, Rosa died of congestive heart failure.

Alberto Sr. rebounded from the passing of his wife and daughter by volunteering at Mount Carmel West hospital, where he was eventually hired and, at 79, still works.

"His attitude was 'These are the cards you are dealt; you either play them or they play you,' " Perez said. "I am more than willing to use whatever talents I have to help cure breast cancer." That pledge, Kaufman figures, will last a lifetime. "He'll never be done with Komen." dfiely@dispatch.com