

By Ashli O'Connell



*"I will never forget my dad's final words to me: 'I love you. Never forget the power of the Holy Spirit.'"*

**When** Miranda Hagin received her diploma from Evangel University this May, neither her mother nor her father was there. But Hagin gripped her elementary education degree proudly, knowing her parents would be proud — and that she was not really alone.

Hagin, an only child, found herself in the unusual and tragic situation of losing both parents to cancer during her sophomore year. Any student in her situation could be forgiven for dropping out, but Hagin has been a testimony of strength, courage and perseverance. She stayed in school, graduated and was also a recipient of EU's highest character award, the Silver Shield.

If you ask Hagin about her parents, Mike and Marlene, the pain still traces her reply, but she insists God has provided for her every step of the way.

## A family plagued by cancer

By the age of 9, Miranda had already lost both paternal grandparents to cancer. On Oct. 8 of her fourth-grade year she lost her maternal grandfather to cancer. Just 17 hours later, on her parents' wedding anniversary, her last remaining grandparent also succumbed to yet a different type of cancer.

"My mom and I were picking out the casket for my grandpa when we got the call that my grandma had passed away in another city," Miranda says.

It was the next summer when Mike Hagin began having severe nosebleeds and was diagnosed with a rare and aggressive cancer of the olfactory nerve.

"Even though his diagnosis was that eventually it would take his life, we prayed," Miranda remembers. "My family did not give up.

People prayed for him all over the world."

Mike went through surgery and chemotherapy, and the following July his MRI came back with no trace of cancer.

"God chose to give him life," Miranda says. "He has always been my hero because through it all he wasn't worried. He had peace from his Heavenly Father."

Mike had been cancer-free for 10 years when Marlene was diagnosed with lung cancer. It was Labor Day weekend of 2006 — Miranda's sophomore year at Evangel. Doctors first suspected Marlene was suffering from allergies or, at worst, a minor infection. Miranda says her mother never smoked; but, tragically her cancer was already at stage 4. Doctors said all they could do was make her comfortable, not cure her.

## 'Never forget the power of the Holy Spirit'

Just two months after Miranda faced her mother's diagnosis, her father's health — always an issue because of a weakened immune system from intense radiation and chemotherapy — started to decline again. In November 2006, Mike got pneumonia and was rushed to the ER. Miranda and Marlene, along with pastors from their home church, Central Assembly of God in Springfield, Mo., were at his side as he declined sharply. They were told he would not recover. They began saying their goodbyes.

Mike lived another two weeks. During this time, he and Marlene were in two different hospitals at the same time — both trying to recover from pneumonia.

Miranda remembers going to see her father after classes.

"He was in terrible shape," she



## Against All Odds



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says. "It broke my heart to see him in that condition. I told him again it was OK if Jesus came to take him home because He would take care of me and my mom.

"I will never forget my dad's final words to me: 'I love you. Never forget the power of the Holy Spirit.' I left and went to go sit with my mom in the hospital and an hour later received a call that my dad had died. I was 19. I had to plan my dad's funeral while my mom tried to recover enough to attend his funeral. We were devastated, but I had to begin focusing on getting my mother better."

Miranda moved out of her Evangel residence hall and back home to care for her mother, but she continued to attend her classes.

In February 2007, Marlene was hospitalized again. Just days before Miranda's 20th birthday, her mother's chemotherapy doctor took her aside. He had been her dad's doctor as well and had seen all that the family had been through for the past 10 years.

"He told me that a solid cancerous mass had filled one of her lungs," Miranda remembers. "He said her body could not handle a miracle surgery and that he didn't see her making it until my 20th birthday on Saturday."

Miranda doesn't remember the next few days, which were a blur of trying to savor the last precious moments with her mother.

But she does remember her 20th birthday.

"I walked into her hospital room to see she had asked her best friend to get me pink roses — my parents always got me pink roses for any accomplishment in my life, and my favorite chocolate cake and a mall gift card because our favorite activity was to shop together. She also signed a card for me that said

she loved me bunches."

That was the last day Miranda spoke to her mother.

Marlene lived for eight more days in a coma and died on March 18, 2007. That night Miranda had gone to the hospital and felt compelled to tell her mother the same thing she told her father only four months before.

"I wanted her to know that I released her to God and that He would take care of me," she says. "An hour later she joined my dad in heaven."

### Finishing college

For Hagin, one of the most important tributes to her parents was continuing at Evangel and earning her diploma.

"It was always my mom's dream for me to get my degree," Hagin says. "She said she would put me through college even if she had to work three jobs, because neither of my parents got a degree. I mentioned taking a semester off when she was diagnosed, but she said that would never be an option."

Since losing her parents, Hagin has seen God provide for her through financial help in finishing that degree.

"I got enough scholarships to pay for college," she says.

She accepted her bachelor's degree from Evangel debt-free and earned enough scholarships to pay for her master's degree at Evangel, which she began in the summer.

"God is so good," she says. "I never would have been able to make it through my parents' illnesses, being the primary caregiver for two dying parents or dealing with the loss of them both, if I had to worry about how I was going to pay for books or tuition."

Hagin's Evangel family surrounded her with the support she

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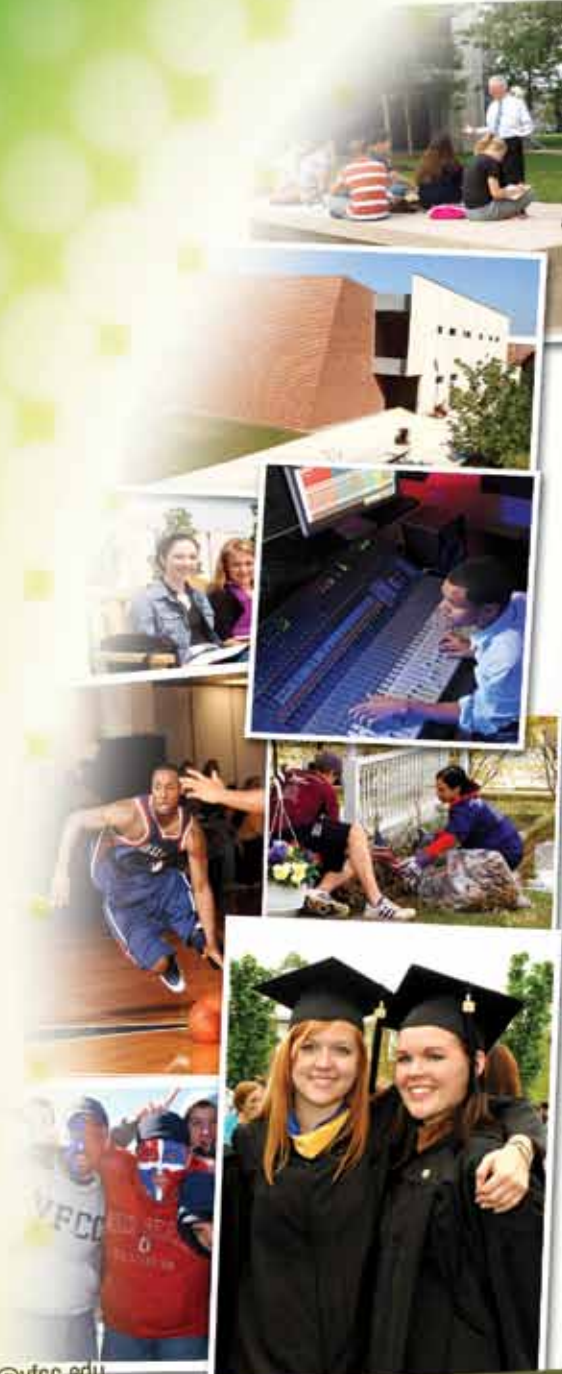
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needed to make it through the incredibly difficult months that followed her parents' deaths.

"All of the education department professors, the administration, my residence director of Lewis Hall and Campus Pastor Sid Griffith really helped me make it through successfully," she says.

She recalls an Evangel friend from Ohio, Alyssa Rigden, whose mother and grandmother made cards with their church scrapbook group and sent her a new one every day for an entire semester.

"All of these people made the difference in me choosing to continue with school," says Hagin. "I could not let go of my mother's dream for me just because we were

going through the most difficult days of our lives. I had to press forward."

## A blessing to others

In addition to finishing school, it's important to Hagin to be active in ministry. She is a small-group leader for 11th-grade girls at Central Assembly of God and is committed to staying with those girls until they graduate from high school. She also volunteers with "Lost and Found of the Ozarks," an organization for children, teenagers and young adults who have lost a parent for any reason.

"Lost and Found is a great place for people to feel safe in dealing with their grief and re-

cover from loss," says Hagin.

It's because of these ministries that Gina Rentschler, EU's director of student life, nominated Hagin for the Silver Shield award.

"Miranda has demonstrated meritorious Christian character," says Rentschler. "Through her pain, Miranda is living an abundant life, allowing God to supply all her needs and positioning herself to be a funnel through which His care and love flows to others." e

ASHLI O'CONNELL is the Web content developer for Evangel University.

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