

## Two Marias I Will Never Forget

Fresno Bee

August 7, 2004

### College Lessons: Two Unforgettable and Extraordinary Maria's

Cancer was attacking Maria Krill and she was undergoing massive chemotherapy. She had lost her hair, her energy level was dangerously low, and she was forced to look at the details of her impending funeral. Maria worked for the County of Fresno as an advocate for children and in the evening she was a graduate student in the Counseling Program at Fresno State. Except for her research project, Maria Krill had completed all of the requirements for the Master degree in Education. Her clock was ticking and she was afraid that cancer would claim her body before she had a chance to complete her research and receive her degree.

Her student colleagues in the research class knew about her struggle with cancer and the race that she was running. As the semester was ending and her health eroding Maria was determined not to give up. Drawing strength from family and friends, Maria completed her research project in the last week of class. But, with failing health she did not have the strength to attend the academic ceremonies to receive her degree and be "hooded". She simply did not have the energy. Because Maria could not go to the mountain, the mountain came to Maria. In a wonderful gesture, University President John Welty and Graduate Dean Vivian Vidoli led a group of faculty to Maria's home. As faculty, we donned our full academic regalia and marched in the traditional procession from the front room of Maria's home to the backyard where many of her family and friends had gathered. As Mistress of Ceremonies, Dr. Vidoli was brilliant. And in the finest academic tradition, President Welty gave his full-unabridged commencement speech. Then, Maria rose from her wheelchair, her diploma was given to her, and the academic hood signifying her university achievement was draped around her shoulders. In this beautiful moment Maria wore a glorious smile as everyone stood and applauded. There were tears of admiration for Maria and for the family and friends who had stood beside her every step of the way.

A few years later, another, different Maria rose to embrace her challenge, and the experience was similarly breathtaking. It had taken years for the name of Maria Guadalupe Ahmada to climb to the top of the dual organ transplant list. Maria Guadalupe suffered from diabetes, was legally blind, and had kidney failure accompanied by an over worked heart that was showing signs of failure. With the patience of a saint Maria Guadalupe checked her blood every four hours, self-administered insulin when necessary, ate tiny pieces of bread to raise her sugar level, and waited with serene fortitude to receive the call that would report that a kidney and pancreas transplant had been found for her.

During this time, Maria Guadalupe needed one last class to complete the requirements for the Master degree in Education. Maria Guadalupe had begun the course, the research project, twice before and each time was forced to withdraw due to consequences brought on by the severity and exhaustion of her medical condition. On the third try, Maria Guadalupe arrived to class on her crutches and vowed to finish her degree before her heart finished beating.

In the first four weeks of the semester, severe heart palpitations forced Maria Guadalupe to rush twice to the emergency room. In the sixth week, bolstered by the effects of her newest medicine, Maria Guadalupe announced that by the grace of God, her heart was steady, and that she would finish the course and receive her degree. True to her word, over the next 10 weeks, Maria Guadalupe was a sight to behold. Growing increasingly weaker and needing volunteers to help her read she rose to the challenge and wrote a research project that was elegant, refined, and relevant. On graduation night, her advisor escorted Maria Guadalupe across the stage and as the first student announced, the faculty from the Kremen School of Education rose with happy smiles and offered warm handshakes to greet the new graduate. Laughing and crying, smiling with tears streaming from her eyes, a bold and humble Maria Guadalupe thanked her family for their unconditional love and her friends for their unwavering support.

These courageous graduates, Maria Krill and Maria Guadalupe Ahmada, certainly are the bright beacons of humility in an ocean

sometimes marred by foggy egos. Suffering daily from the painful and exhausting effects of their illnesses, these brave women not only persevered and endured, they showed us that with willing spirits, trust, and love, we too might someday find ourselves boldly and humbly, similarly triumphant.

Against all odds, against every medical prediction, Maria Krill proved her doctors wrong and has survived her cancer. Her hair has grown back and so have her dry wit and her incredible sense of humor. Three weeks after her graduation Maria Guadalupe Ahmada, still waiting for her transplant, passed away. Her friends and family celebrated her heroic personal life and her beautiful, relentless optimism. Our faculty will honor the outstanding personal and academic success of Maria Krill and Maria Guadalupe Ahmada and the contribution they made to our lives forever.

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