

Amazing Father-Daughter Duo Wins Marathon by Jessica Samakow

Iram Leon was the first runner to cross the finish line at the Gusher Marathon in Beaumont, Texas on Saturday with a time of 3:07:35. But Leon, who has brain cancer, insists that his 6-year-old daughter was technically the winner -- he pushed her in a stroller the entire 26-mile race.

"Here sore, reflecting and grateful, I still can't believe that I won a marathon. Well, I came in second behind Kiana," Leon wrote on his blog.

Leon, now 32, was diagnosed with a Grade 2 Diffuse Astrocytoma in Nov. 2010, shortly after his 30th birthday. "Life goes downhill fast after you turn 30," he joked in an interview with The Huffington Post. Doctors have told Leon that he is not going to beat the cancer, but their goal is for him to live until he's 40.

His daughter, Kiana, knows that Dad is sick. Leon and Kiana's mother are divorced and the first-grader lives with him the majority of the year. She has seen him suffer seizures. They practice "911 drills" at home. But Leon struggles with how much information to divulge to Kiana while she is still so young. "There's no good balance between protecting a kid from this and sharing it with them," Leon said. Through counseling, he has learned that he shouldn't alarm her, nor should he underplay how serious his disease is. "Daddy has a boo boo on his left temporal lobe," isn't the right approach, he explained.

Since the diagnosis, Leon's perspective on parenting has changed tremendously. "The one thing I'm not going to say on my death bed is, 'I wish I spent more time with my kid,'" he told HuffPost.

And so, six months after he found out he had cancer, when Kiana was 4, Leon decided that he no longer wanted to run -- an activity he's enjoyed since third grade -- without taking her along for the ride. Because of his cancer, which affects his memory and language skills, Leon isn't able to drive a car, work, or play contact sports like soccer. But running is "just one foot in front of the other," he said.

They completed their first half-marathon together in October 2012. Leon convinced his mother, who was then 60, to run with him and Kiana in a stroller too. Since then, father and daughter have competed in half a dozen races. On Saturday, at the Gusher, they took their first marathon medal home.

Before the race even started, Leon faced challenges. Marathons don't typically permit strollers; he was turned down four different times before the Gusher said it was OK. Over the phone, he stressed that he was uncomfortable with the special treatment, but said the most important thing was being able to compete with Kiana.

Leon detailed what the race was like on his blog, noting several setbacks, including a flat tire on the stroller, strong winds and an untied shoelace. But Leon also took advantage of a teachable moment during the race. At one point, three bikers were cycling next to the pair. "Kiana asked why are they hanging out with us and why is everyone waving at us. I kept having to barrel down because of the wind and so I just told her to be polite and wave and say hi to anyone saying hi to her," he wrote on his blog.

One of the bikers captured video (above) of Leon singing Bon Jovi's "It's My Life" while pushing Kiana.

Kiana usually teases her Dad about placing behind her, but this time, Leon said, the girl was cheering "we won" when they crossed the finish line, instead of her usual "I won."

Still, Dad is always proud to give the credit to his daughter. "At the awards ceremony, I immediately placed [the medal] on her neck and like every other race she's been part of it that medal hangs in her room," he wrote. Since the win, the two were featured in a local newspaper and on Outside Magazine's website, and a photo of them was splashed across The Wall Street Journal's sports section. The Sports Society for American Health which hosts the Gusher Marathon has set up a college fund for Kiana with a goal of \$30,000.

But perhaps the most touching keepsake from the race was made by Kiana, who loves to draw. She sketched her and her father running the Gusher, and he posted it on Facebook with the caption, "Kiana's version both better than the newsprint and my blog."