

Portraits of Julia

by Michael Sobel

There is a beautiful portrait of Julia in the Rusinek home. The painting catches your eye the instant you step into the living room: Julia seated gracefully in a pastoral setting, a serene smile upon her face. Roza and Henry, Julia's parents, had discovered a talented, young artist in the city and commissioned him to render the portrait. This was the second posthumous portrait of Julia. While the first image managed to portray Julia's thoughtful introspection, the artist had not quite captured her likeness. Upon receiving the new painting, there was again some disappointment in the semblance. Although the second artist managed to portray an aspect of her smile and something in her gaze, he hadn't quite realized the gentle athleticism of her presence. Still, the new portrait was displayed in the living room and little was said about it in the days that followed. As time passed, however, there was a growing appreciation for the new painting. Indeed, the artist had evoked one of Julia's familiar expressions. I remember Roza saying, "we have to accept that any portrait can only depict an aspect of a person." As appreciation for the second painting grew, there was also renewed admiration for the initial portrait. Now both portraits are displayed in the Rusinek home, each offering a sliver of her radiance.

Each of us has come to know Julia in a unique and special way. Some were fortunate enough to know her in life. For others, Run for Children represents a first glimpse into her spirit. I met Vivian, Julia's sister, six months after Julia died in 1999 from an undiagnosed heart condition while running in the streets of Washington DC. Julia had been living in Dupont Circle and interning at the Children's Law Center – a service providing for abused and neglected children - after her junior year at Yale University. The first Run for Children was held in New Haven in 2000 and today marks the thirteenth anniversary of the event. This annual event has been particularly meaningful to me not only for the benefit it brings to the community through its support of LEAP but also in the way it has allowed me to feel close to Julia, my wife's sister and aunt to our three children.

At the close of the run each year, we have heard a tribute to Julia from a family member or friend. These living portraits painted by those who knew, loved and continue to love Julia have illuminated her in my heart and mind as I imagine they have for all who attend the event. Together with her poems, essays, reflections and letters, these vital memories have ushered her into my life as a very real presence.

I have learned of a woman profoundly devoted to family and friends, a champion of children in need, a passionate runner and a writer of prodigious talent. Whatever Julia did, she did with the whole of her body and soul. Her commitment to children serves as an example. Her tireless efforts toward this aim include work with the Fresh Air Fund, the Children's Defense Fund, the Peace Games at Yale and the Children's Law Center. Julia's Run for Children perpetuates this dedication through its support of LEAP, an innovative program based in New Haven committed to the academic and social enrichment of children.

While Julia's talents and accomplishments are truly impressive, what has most struck me is the poetry of her spirit. I have struggled to understand and emulate something that Julia seemed to innately feel and know: how to simultaneously be in the world and experience and appreciate all of its nuance. She thoroughly embraced life in all of its

detail, large and small, pleasant and painful. Nowhere was this so evident as in her passion for running. One of Julia's great thrills was to run in the rain and she described the joy and pain of every drop that touched her skin and welcomed it all as a part of life. The following passage is from one of her many reflections on running:

Every run is a journey for me, a physical and psychological experience which changes my perspective and renews me. When I run, I confront the part of myself which inspires me and propels me forward in everything I do, although I never fully understand what my reasons are or what my purpose is. Running has shown me my boundaries yet has taught me to deny their capacity for inhibition. I have learned to accept my own limits and to understand that while there may be a point where my power to push forward ends, I must bask in the glory and adventures which lay before that point.

For Julia, running was transcendent and the Run for Children itself is a living portrait of Julia; at once physical and spiritual, geared toward the community but still conducive to self-reflection and most of all, serving the hope and promise that is children. That the run is a poetic reflection of Julia is a tribute to the hard work of her parents. Each year before the run, I have seen the tremendous devotion and endless hours that Roza and Henry have poured into this event. Having lost a sibling in his twenties, I know the acute pain that comes with the sweetness of memory. For Roza and Henry to celebrate Julia and give to the community in this way is not only an act of love but an act of courage. It is this type of courage that came so naturally to Julia.

When I hear Julia's written word – whether a reflective journal entry, a heartfelt letter, or a beautiful poem – I am always struck by the almost supernatural wisdom she possessed at such a young age. It is both inspiring and humbling. I imagine we all feel a terrible pang when we consider the great potential that was given such brief voice in this world. As individuals, it is hard to fathom such magnificence and such loss but together, as family, as friends, as a caring and loving community we can begin to embrace Julia's glow and offer it to the next generation.

This, I feel, is everything

poem written by Julia when she was 19

This river

*Whose sound I know
I always long to hear
Though I am not aware
Of my longing until I hear it.*

This beauty

*The peachy white rocks
Peering out of the water
Like curious, lost children
The trees lining the shore
Standing by, in expectation
Anticipation, - on guard.*

This sky

*Stained by clouds of gray
And midnight blue
The clear patches which scream to me
Of their openness, of their possibilities
Of endlessness and eternity.*

This feeling

*This wholeness
A tiny ripple in the water below me
Stirring up my insides
The wind whispering through my body
Caressing my soul
Arousing it from slumber of death*

Life! Life!

*It all seems so clear here –
What is mortal and what is not.*