

After a while, people just forget. I don't want people to forget."

Mario Blanco



memorial

A photograph of Raven Maria Blanco is displayed at a masquerade ball in October held to raise funds for a foundation established in her name.

Nineteen children have died in the past 14 years in dental emergencies. Raven's death at age 6 in 2007, after she took a sedative for a routine dental exam and cleaning, was one of them.

DEE SARGLEY/PHOTO | THE VIRGINIAN-PILOT

# FOUNDATION PSA, COURSES SET UP TO SAVE LIVES

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Today, a tree spills shade and shadows across a heart-shaped headstone that depicts Raven's smile from one of her last school pictures. It is among Blanco's favorite images of the child who'd looked just like him.

That first year, he bled his grief by the rectangle of faded grass at Forest Lawn Cemetery in Norfolk. When all else felt wrong, the grave site felt right.

Blanco had begun his family later in life. He'd traveled from Long Island to California to Texas and back home again before settling in Virginia in his mid-30s. He started a construction company and met his wife, Robin, who in 1988 gave birth to their first child, Raven. Another daughter followed, then a son, and they lived a comfortable, happy life.

Until that day. Nearly four years have passed, and still Blanco visits the grave so often he keeps a lawn chair in the back of his truck.

In October, her grave was decorated with a purple, friendly-faced ghost. In December, the Blancos placed ornaments on the tree's bare limbs.

There are dozens of mementos year round: A ceramic dog, an angel figurine, an elephant-shaped cup, Raven's bicycle helmet, a tin of tiny souvenirs Blanco picks up on family trips.

One shivering-cold day in late fall, Blanco, now 55, stood at her headstone and wondered how March 9, 2007, could feel like both yesterday and a hundred years ago.

He pulled up the hood on his tie-dyed sweatshirt. There was a mist in the air and in his eyes. He shook his head. "After a while, people just forget. I don't want people to forget."

This is how Blanco remembers it.

He and Robin and Raven arrived at the dentist with a few minutes to spare. The staff gave the 8-year-old some stickers and a pink ring with googly eyes as she waited, then an oral sedative.

She'd had it before, it would keep her awake but help her relax as she waited with her parents in the lobby.

But something seemed different this time, Blanco said. She commented on the sedative's sour taste, then became fidgety.

The staff escorted Raven to her room. But first, she handed Blanco the pink ring.

Hold my eyes, she told him. I love you.

A couple of patients left as they waited. Another one came in.

Why is there an ambulance outside, the new patient asked the receptionist. Someone in the back stopped breathing, she said.

Raven was the only one still there. Robin ran to her. It was chaotic, Blanco said.

Paramedics. Police. The police restrained them as an unresponsive Raven left in an ambulance.

Blanco said he will never know the intricacies of what went wrong.

The medical examiner concluded Raven died from complications of dental sedation. It was ruled accidental.

A year later, the Virginia Board of Dentistry alleged that Raven's dentist had failed to perform a pre-operative assessment, obtain an updated health history, continuously monitor Raven's blood pressure, properly document vital signs and proficiently handle emergencies and complications.

He was summoned to an informal conference in Richmond, where the dental board concluded that his record-keeping was inadequate. The board cleared him of all other wrongdoing and ordered the dentist to complete seven hours of continuing education and risk management, according to its records.

The Blancos filed a civil suit in Virginia Beach Circuit Court. Months passed, then years. The case was settled out of court in 2009, and the terms were kept confidential.

Blanco had to get on with

life. Twice, he traveled to South Africa, where he had business connections. Struck by the poverty of children he saw in the streets, he handed out 100 soccer balls. His reward was smile-creaked faces, little hands clinging proudly to something of their own.

He felt alive. Later, he donated \$10,000 for a groundbreaking on a recreation and worship center for the children there. He equipped them with four months of dental hygiene products.

Back in Virginia, Blanco laid the groundwork for a charitable organization in Raven's name. He put another \$10,000 into a black-tie fundraiser to kick it off.

The Raven Maria Blanco Foundation would advocate emergency preparedness in dental offices across the country. It would petition dental associations in every state. It would try to get automated external defibrillators in dental facilities that offer free and discounted services—and to schools and parks and wherever else they were lacking.

On a smaller scale, it would provide loath-shaped "comfort pillows" for young patients to clutch during visits to the dentist.

When Blanco hands out the pillows, he talks about Raven. He talks about how important it is for dentists to be prepared for emergencies.

He wants her death to save a life. Drawings and gunfire claim more young lives than dental emergencies, but such deaths have occurred at least once a year since 1996.

Nineteen children died in that 14-year span, based on unofficial counts.

There is no formal reporting system, said Larry Sangrik, a dentist who lectures nationally on emergency preparedness in the dental profession and keeps track of the issue. He and others rely mostly on media reports.

Deaths seem to be on the rise: eight of the 19 occurred in the past two years. A ma-

majority died from complications of dental sedation— which dental associations still consider overwhelmingly safe if done properly.

"Where I see a great shortfall in the profession as a whole is most are not equipped to assist a non-breathing patient," Sangrik said.

In May, Blanco read about the death of a 6-year-old Richmond boy named Jacob Hill.

He was getting cavity fillings and caps; he went into cardiac arrest after a breathing tube was removed, according to media reports. Blanco went to Jacob's funeral.

Then he hired someone to run Raven's foundation full-time. If it was left to him, he said, they would get nowhere fast.

Nicole Cunha, his niece, had the time and know-how. By fall, she'd joined forces with Sangrik and the Institute of Medical Emergency Preparedness. She wants every dentist to adopt the institute's concept known as the Six Links of Survival—a checklist that includes a plan, a manual, mock drills and the equipment and medications to handle emergencies.

Cunha oversaw the creation of a public service announcement featuring Sangrik and Blanco. She will ship out 200 this week to dental associations, boards, malpractice and anesthetic companies and dental vendors.

Sangrik will lead a Virginia Dental Association-endorsed course on emergency preparedness in Richmond this spring. It is called the Raven Maria Blanco Foundation Lecture.

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Robin and Mario Blanco held a ball in October to raise funds for the foundation they created to raise awareness of medical emergency preparedness in dental offices.