

In Memoriam—Sean Billings McNamara '00

All his life, he wanted to make a difference

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Twelve years older than his sister, Sean McNamara taught her a life lesson she has never forgotten. “I was a little girl and playing with a Magic 8 Ball,” says Nora Julia Vargas. “I asked it, ‘Will I be beautiful?’” Her brother sat her down and said firmly, “It doesn’t matter whether you grow up to be beautiful. What’s important is what you do with your life and that you’re beautiful inside.”

His response was typical Sean, says Vargas, remembering his conscientious nature and ability to focus on what was truly important in life.

After graduating summa cum laude from UNH, McNamara joined the Peace Corps and was sent to Uzbekistan. He taught English in the public schools and trained Uzbek teachers. His time there was cut short when the U.S. government, concerned for Peace Corps volunteers’ safety, rushed them out of Uzbekistan following the attacks of 9-11. “He had been there for 13 months. Having to leave early was a great disappointment,” says his mother, Marilyn (Billings) McNamara '71. “He had learned to speak the difficult language fluently and made a lot of friends. He accomplished a lot, including establishing an English-language library.”

McNamara returned to school, graduating with highest honors from Syracuse University College of Law and the university's Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs, earning both Juris Doctor and Master of Public Administration degrees. He went on to a stellar career in Washington as a trial attorney in the U.S. Attorney General's honors program and was ultimately named senior counsel for management in the national courts section of the civil division of the U.S. Department of Justice. The handsome young lawyer was admired both professionally and personally. "There were a lot hearts broken when we got engaged," says Courtney McNamara, his wife of six years.

"Sean felt he could make a difference in the Department of Justice," says McNamara's mother, adding that making a difference was a theme throughout her son's life. In kindergarten he watched a television program about the need to refurbish the Statue of Liberty and promptly informed the school principal that the statue needed the students' help. "He went from room to room with a can and was very proud that he collected \$17.10," says his mother. A popular student in junior high school, he received a citizenship award after intervening on behalf of two students who were being bullied. "These are my friends," McNamara told the bullies. "So lay off." And they did.

In many ways her conscientious son was "born old," says his mother, remembering the little boy who wore a suit, dress shirt and necktie on his first day of kindergarten because he felt it was important to look his best. When he got a rare "B" in third-grade math, his mother had to convince him that it would not go on his permanent record. In high school he informed his mother that she should no longer ask if he had done his homework. "It's my responsibility," he said.

In August 2014, McNamara was stricken with an aggressive form of brain cancer. Major surgery, chemotherapy and radiation followed. Although the treatments affected his vision, as soon as he was released from the hospital he read everything he could about his disease and devised his own healthy diet of homemade food. The devoted husband and father of a little boy, Ian, "was determined to live for his wife and son," says his sister Nora. "Family meant everything to him." He did well for nearly a year before tests showed that the disease had returned. On July 10, McNamara passed away at his home on Capitol Hill. He was 36 years old.

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