“Luigi means courageous warrior – and that’s exactly what my father was” – a testament to the bravery of a much-loved family man who fell victim to COVID-19

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Luigi Ciesco came from a small village in southern Italy, growing up in real poverty, before meeting his wife-to-be Vincenza, and emigrating to the United Kingdom in the 1960s. A husband for 57 years, a father of 4 and a grandfather of 8, Luigi worked for the National Health Service in England. Twenty years ago he contracted methicillin-resistant Staphylococcus aureus (MRSA), a type of bacterial infection which is resistant to many widely used antibiotics, which seriously compromised his health and led to multiple illnesses over the following years.

On a visit to his daughter, Elena, what comes across so poignantly is how hard Luigi fought to live through his illnesses and how much he had to live for. He never gave up.

“The doctors told us many times he wasn’t going to live. He had to have several life-saving emergency surgeries. I can’t even tell you how many times he had sepsis. He suffered from heart and kidney failure, and was severely disabled after his many operations. Most people would have given up.”

The photos Elena shows us are a testament to his joy of life and the love for his family: a ride in a sports car, family celebrations, enjoying being the centre of attention, dancing with his daughter, sitting in the sunshine with his family, enjoying their company and fully enjoying life.

“Oh, he was just so lovable, a family man, who absolutely loved his garden, had a passion for food and – even though he had lived in England for 60 years of his life – was very much an Italian. I

absolutely loved that," says Elena.

But when COVID-19 arrived in Europe, it was a real concern for the family, as Elena explains: "Both my dad and my mum – who has chronic obstructive pulmonary disease(COPD) – were vulnerable, so we were advised to keep both parents isolated, which we did for 9 months. We tried to set up video calls with them, which was funny, because they weren't techie people at all. Otherwise, we just relied on the telephone and seeing them when we handed shopping through their window. We're a big Italian family, so we're used to having get-togethers every Sunday, but of course, there was no chance of that."

Then, in November 2020, Luigi was admitted into hospital because of shortness of breath. On arrival, he tested negative for COVID-19 and after a 10-day stay, he was allowed to return home.

"When he came home he was determined to keep going, he was still getting himself up and doing his exercises, walking around the table. I've never ever known anybody with such determination, strength and courage. He was my hero."

Elena took him by car to a drive-through test centre. The following day he became severely unwell, disorientated and breathless. When the result came back from the test centre, it showed her father was positive for COVID-19.

"It was very distressing to see and to have to call the ambulance a second time. Because of the restrictions at the time, when he was readmitted, nobody was able to be with him. My dad was a very anxious man – he really needed his family around him, but we weren't able to be there for him. That was the hardest part."

Luigi passed away in the same hospital where he had contracted MRSA 20 years earlier. "I wish he had been able to die at home. We all had to wear full PPE [personal protective equipment], gloves and facemasks to say our goodbyes. It's not the way I would have wanted it to be for any of us. We were all able to be there when he passed away, but it wasn't a beautiful ending to his life."

Life for Elena has now changed irrevocably because of her father's death: "Life isn't ever going to be normal for me now. I think about my dad every minute of every day. It's never going to be the same. I've seen the effects of the virus and the trauma it's caused to my family

and myself, and I wouldn't wish that on anybody".

And with Elena's mum still remaining vulnerable to the virus, Elena is adamant that she won't be stopping any protective measures soon: "COVID-19 is still here and it's still killing people. I know people will want to think that life is back to normal, but it's not. And even though the restrictions have been lifted, and facemasks are an option, I will still be making sure I'm fully protected".

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