

WORKING MOTHER

The Mommy Diaries

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**Friends don't
let friends
stay depressed**
What every working
mom needs to know

This Is How She Does It

RAYSA PENELOPE ABREU

32, executive assistant, Vornado Realty Trust, New York City; single mom to Martín Salvador Ortega, 10

When doctors told Raysa Penelope Abreu that the man who was her life partner, her mentor and the father of her son had something more serious than shortness of breath—it was cancer, and he had less than three months to live—she didn't cry or despair. She rose to her feet, picked up her handbag and had one thought: "I knew I needed to get him out of that hospital to a place where he'd survive."

So began a three-year journey to cure Salvador Ortega of non-small-cell lung cancer. It would include radiation and chemotherapy, as well as experimental approaches like a trip to Puebla, Mexico, for curative ant eggs. Raysa's determination and hope were unwavering. "We wanted to have him as long as possible," she says. "We researched every option. We tried everything."

Raysa's single-minded, passionate efforts to prolong Salvador's life didn't surprise anyone who knows her. Loyal, enthusiastic and bullheaded are the adjectives her friends and family readily supply, adding that she always looks at the bright side of life. "Raysa is a Taurus, and she's a bull in the best sense of the word," says her best friend, Janine D, a singer and actor who currently lives in the Middle East. "She can make what looks impossible seem possible. She's a fighter and a survivor."

An executive assistant at Vornado Realty Trust, a large commercial real estate company in Manhattan, Raysa worked full-time as she labored to find a cure for Salvador and took care of their son, Martín. Her boss, Wendy Silverstein, executive VP of capital

HAIR AND MAKEUP: MANSOON FARAJ FOR YVES DUJIF; SALON: STYLING BY JULIA ROSE; COULOMBE; DRESS: NANETTE LÉPORE (\$395); SAKSIFIFHAVENUE.COM; EARRINGS: PHILARATON (\$8); TARGET.COM; NECKLACE: NAPIER (\$34); KOHLS.COM.

BY SUZANNE RISS • PHOTOGRAPHS BY LAURA MOSS

markets, was very supportive. “Wendy’s own husband had died of cancer when her kids were young,” Raysa says. “She understood everything I was going through. She had already lived it.”

ALWAYS A FIGHTER

The instinct to battle back was part of Raysa’s personality as a child growing up in the Dominican Republic, where she would stand up not only for herself but also for her younger brother, Pedro. “Raysa always helped me get what I wanted, whether it was a toy or getting into college,” Pedro says. “No matter what my goal was, she would encourage me. She also protected me, even if it meant getting into a fight for me or just taking the blame.” Born just 14 months apart, Raysa and Pedro were best friends throughout childhood, and they were also there for each other when their parents divorced.

“We’d ride dirt bikes or watch old films,” she says. Pedro remembers his sister’s loyalty. “Raysa was always making friends everywhere we went. It was hard for me to meet new people, so I would just tag along with her and hang out with her and her friends,” he recalls. “She always accepted me tagging along, and she always invited me no matter where she was going. I can’t remember one time when she tried to get rid of me.” Pedro’s wife, Veronica, adds that as a tribute to their love for Raysa, they named their second daughter after her. “Unlike many siblings, Raysa and Pedro didn’t argue. They were just always there for one another,” says Veronica.

What Raysa remembers most about growing up in the Dominican Republic is her bare feet touching smooth marble floors, the smell of grass after a tropical rainstorm, the endless white beaches. No surprise that moving from this paradise to an apartment in Queens, NY, with her mother and brother when she was 6 years old was an adjustment. They relocated in search of a better life, and Raysa’s mother, Maribel Burgos, went to college so she could become a teacher. “My mom worked hard,” Raysa says. “She came here as an immigrant, working and going to school, yet she was tireless.” A year after they moved to



FAMILY ALBUM: Raysa and Martín with Salvador on their last trip to Mexico; Raysa, 6, with her brother, Pedro, 5, in the Dominican Republic.

New York, her mother met Raysa’s future stepfather. A sister was born soon after, giving Raysa, as the oldest, more responsibility. Her mother kept life interesting, taking them on trips to Coney Island and bicycle rides through Central Park. “My mom is adventurous, and we were always exploring new places,” Raysa says.

Best of all, Raysa loved the cultural diversity she encountered in Queens. “I had an Indian friend who wore a sari and introduced me to Indian films and curry,” she says. “I also had good Lebanese and Egyptian friends. I was absorbing all these new points of view.” After high school she went to the well-respected Fashion Institute of Technology, studying advertising and marketing, then worked in marketing for a while before landing the job at Vornado. As an executive assistant, she supports her boss by handling schedules, phones, correspondence and the like. Because she had Martín right after college, she says, she’s still finding herself and dreams that one day she will become a documentary filmmaker.

MEETING HER MATCH

Through her job at Vornado, Raysa became involved in the Big Brothers, Big Sisters of America program, shooting and directing a short film about the positive influence of mentoring on inner-city kids to help raise money. “There’s a shortage of big brothers for Hispanic and black boys,” she says. “Since I have a son and I’m Latina, this is a passionate cause for me.”

Though filmmaking is near and dear to Raysa’s heart, she is also a practical person. “I need to have health insurance, to pay my rent and to give my son all that I want him to have.” This includes piano

and guitar lessons, as well as a trip for his birthday. So far, Martín has visited ten countries, including Mexico, Lebanon, Japan and Dubai.

It was while Raysa was studying film at the New School for Social Research that she

would meet the most important man in her life. Teaching the film class was Salvador Ortega, a Mexican/Lebanese cultural anthropologist, film writer, photographer and painter who was in his midforties, about twice Raysa’s age. Still, for her, “the second I walked into his class, I was in love. There was something very charming about him. I was fascinated by everything and anything this man had to say.” They would enjoy great conversations about everyone from Lacan and Freud to Hillary Clinton and the Coen brothers. “We had a lot in common,” she says. They started dating almost immediately, and by the end of the semester they were living together. Before the academic year was over, Raysa was pregnant with Martín, who was born in 1998.

When Martín was 5, they got the devastating news that Salvador was ill. A “very healthy person” who ate only organic food and didn’t smoke, Salvador was the last person Raysa imagined would get this very rare form of lung cancer. Though a tumor was removed, along with one lung, the prognosis for Salvador was grim.

Together, they marshaled their forces, researching the disease and the best treatment options. “My son’s father was *not* going to die in three months,” says Raysa. “We put in a lot of work and found a doctor we liked at Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center.” After radiation, chemotherapy and experimental medication, Salvador started to get better. “They said maybe he had a year or two to live,” she recalls.

LITTLE MIRACLES

Despite the extreme ups and downs during this period, Raysa remembers a lot of great times. “Sal maintained his sense of humor,” she says. “He always looked at how we could have fun. We watched movies. We’d laugh. We were always silly.” But there were also darker days when Salvador would be indignant. “And I had to deal with our son being angry, and I was also very angry at the world.” But they continued to write, paint, enjoy music and discuss new projects. They ate well and took a vacation to Mexico. “Sal was always my teacher, and always cinematic,” says Raysa. She recalls the time he lapsed into a coma for 24 hours during his treatment. When he awoke, he said, “What happened? All I remember is a fade to black.”

After three years of every treatment under the sun, they decided it was enough, and Salvador stopped taking his morphine. “The last summer before he passed away, he didn’t want to be medicated—he wanted to be present for us,” Raysa recalls. Salvador Ortega died on Friday, October 19, 2007, at age 54, about ten years older than his own mother was when she succumbed to cancer. That day, Martín wasn’t feeling well and stayed home from school. Salvador, who was in hospice care, called the house at 8:00 a.m.

Raysa had already left for work, but Martín was able to talk to his dad one last time. “I am grateful for the little miracles,” she says.

True to Salvador’s wishes, there was a party where everyone listened to great music, drank wine and celebrated his life. Martín believes his father is watching over him and his mother. Raysa is comforted by the fact that Martín will grow up knowing how much he is loved. Unlike some single moms, Raysa never has to scramble to find someone to watch her son. Her challenge is picking who among their extended family and friends, including her parents and her sister, will get the pleasure.

CULTURAL RICHES

On a typical day, Raysa wakes at 6:30 a.m. to walk and feed their dog, Che, a husky-shepherd mix. She goes back to sleep until 7:30 a.m., when she gets up again to wake Martín and make breakfast, which usually involves peeling a lot of clementines. Raysa prepares a fresh lunch for Martín every day; a favorite is pesto tortellini. At 8:00 a.m. they walk to school. Then Raysa catches the train to work, arriving by 9:00 a.m. Martín has a regular babysitter who takes him to music and soccer classes after school. Raysa gets home by 7:15

p.m. most nights. Favorite weekend activities include riding their bikes along the Hudson River. “The most amazing thing is to see the world through a child’s eyes,” she says.

Raysa is pleased that her son thrives academically and also appreciates his cultural heritage. “Our culture is a big part of who we are, so Sal and I wanted him to learn Spanish,” she says. “That way he can go to Mexico and the Dominican Republic and Spain and talk to his family.” Though they celebrate Christmas, they don’t exchange gifts. “We send gifts to poor children in the Dominican Republic,” she says. “This is okay with Martín because to him Christmas is every day.”

A highly intelligent boy, Martín, though only 10, knows he wants to attend the University of Cambridge in England and study cultural anthropology like his dad. He went to CancerCare at Sloan-Kettering while his father was sick so he could talk about the experience and also spoke with counselors at school. “Unlike Martín, I haven’t grieved,” Raysa says. “I’m not ready to let go of Sal yet.” But she recently called Gilda’s Club, a support group for anyone whose life has been touched by cancer.

When Raysa was crying recently, Martín came to her and said, “Maybe you need to move on.” Though she’s not ready to do that, mother and son decided to write a dark comedy together about Salvador. “We get to remember the good stuff and laugh about it,” Raysa explains. Always ready to laugh, she has at times been depressed during this difficult period of her life. But it’s never for long, she says, because she surrounds herself with “good people and good energy,” adding, “when I’m down, I get back up.” A big incentive: her son.

“You have no other choice when you have a child than to wake up in the morning and make sure this little person you’re raising is okay,” Raysa says. “And he needs to know I’m okay, too. Sometimes I make myself happy even if I don’t feel it.” Despite an incredibly difficult year, Raysa greets each day with a lot of energy. “I love life,” she says. “It’s really cool to be alive.” ■

ON RAYSA, TOP: SUITON CASHMERE (\$289); BLOOMINGDALE’S NYC; EARRINGS: \$0 (KOHLS.COM); NECKTIE: PRIMAVERA (\$55); KOHLS.COM; BRACELET: DALSY FUENTES (\$39); KOHLS.COM; ON MARTÍN, SHIRT AND T-SHIRT: JACARDI (\$94 AND \$40); JACARDI/SA.COM; PENCIL AND MARKERS: DIXON TICONDEROGA (\$4 AND \$15); FRANKS.COM

GIVE AND TAKE: Raysa loves to see the world through the eyes of her son, Martín.

