

# Past tragedy motivates one of Chippewa's top graduates

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By Thomas Franz 



Chippewa Valley graduate Ella Lafata will attend the University of Michigan this fall. (Photo provided by Ella Lafata)

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CLINTON TOWNSHIP — “They really lived every day like it was their last.”

When Ella Lafata was 11 years old, she saw both of her parents die nine months apart from each other.

The attitudes that each of her parents had toward their illnesses left a lasting mark on Lafata, and that helped make her one of Chippewa Valley High School's top graduates this spring.

“Both of my parents were the most full-of-life people ever,” Lafata said. “I have nothing but great memories for both of them.”

Lafata's father died Feb. 2, 2009, after a cyst on an artery popped. He had a long battle with heart issues prior to that, Lafata said, but he embraced the challenges that went along with previous operations.

“The man had so many scars on him from past surgeries it looked like a shark attacked him, but he loved them; he embraced all of them,” Lafata said.

In June of the same year, Lafata's mother was diagnosed with cervical cancer, but just like Lafata's father, she took on a positive attitude toward her illness.

“She was the coolest mom. When she was diagnosed, she cut her hair short. She got a mohawk and dyed it pink, and she also got a tattoo on both sides of her head,” Lafata said. “She always had the best positivity going through radiation and chemotherapy.”

Lafata's mother died during the week of Thanksgiving of that year.

Despite the short amount of time she had with her parents, Lafata said she remains grateful for what she learned from them.

“They really gave us the longest childhood we could’ve had with them,” Lafata said.

Lafata and her two older brothers — Antonio, a 2013 Chippewa graduate, and Al, a 2014 Chippewa graduate — were raised by their godfather, who moved from Las Vegas to be with the three children.

From there, the siblings stuck together. Antonio is currently involved in a work-study program, and Al is attending Macomb Community College with the hopes of attending Michigan State University this winter.

On June 12, Ella Lafata graduated from Chippewa Valley with a 3.97 GPA, and she will head to the University of Michigan this fall to study biomedical sciences.

“We definitely know that, in the end, it’s us three, and it’s going to be us three because it always has been us three, but day-to-day life, we just get our stuff done. Whatever you’re into or whatever you have going on, you need to finish it yourself. It was more independence,” Lafata said.

Having gone through such a traumatic experience as an 11-year-old helped Lafata keep perspective through any struggles she may have encountered during high school.

“At the end of the day, there are bigger things than failing a math test. There’s always going to be something bigger,” Lafata said. “There’s more to life than strictly learning too. You have to take those lessons to real life, and even if you don’t, there’s more out there.”

Picking a major to study in college came easy for Lafata. Knowing that there are now routine operations to help individuals with the same condition that her father passed away from, Lafata is hopeful to be involved with the creation or evolution of medical technology.

“Seven years ago, no doctor would dare operate on a cyst like that, even though now it’s a really simple surgery. Medical advances are amazing,” Lafata said.

Lafata is going to spend her summer traveling and visiting relatives throughout Europe for a month. When she returns, she’ll have to face the reality of being the first of her siblings to leave home, which is something she never envisioned.

“I always thought I would be the one left. Now, I’m the one leaving and I’m having a really difficult time finding words to part with, especially to my brothers,” Lafata said. “I never would’ve thought that would happen.”

#### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

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