

One man's passing is a reminder for



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POLITI

In the hours before he took his final breath, before the cancer that started as a spot the size of a pencil eraser on his arm claimed his life, Mike Geltrude whispered his last two words.

"Time out."

They were fitting for a man who had spent his life coaching youth sports in Essex County, but powerful for another reason. How many times

did John Geltrude wish he could stop time during that final year of his father's life, when a man so fit and healthy had faded so quickly?

"I had the same reaction probably 90 percent of people do — skin cancer, you get it removed, you move on," John Geltrude said, remembering that initial diagnosis. "But with melanoma, once it's in your system, forget it. You're done."

It took just one year for the cancer to spread from his arm, to his brain and lungs, before Mike Geltrude lost his battle on Feb. 20, 2005. He left behind his wife, two daughters and three grandkids, and countless athletes who benefited from his coaching, patience and dedication.

Don't forget your sunscreen, says the ultimate nag, Mom. Moms say it. School nurses

POLITI

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 37

sure those warnings get out there, a crusade to honor his father and protect young athletes. He has started a foundation in his father's name, and tonight — fittingly, on National Melanoma Awareness Day — about 550 people will gather for a dinner at Nanina's in the Park in Belleville to help support the cause.

Melanoma is the sixth most common cancer among men and seventh most common among women, affecting one in 75 people. Young athletes are especially at risk: 80 percent of sun damage happens before a person turns 18.

Geltrude, a former high school soccer star in Nutley, plans to use these statistics when he speaks at school assemblies about sun protection. If the numbers and facts don't get through to the kids, this will: photos of his father's arm, covered in 40 tumors and scorched from the radiation treatment.

"It was so hard to see," Geltrude said, "because you knew this is what's going on in his lungs and brain."

Athletics were at the center of Mike Geltrude's life, and as a result, he spent that life outdoors. He was a track coach at Cedar Grove High, where he also taught math, for three decades. In Nutley, his

mother therapy treatment, but the disease was relentless. In November 2005, the family received the news it feared the most: The cancer had spread to his lungs and brain.

He signed up for an experimental treatment, but John Geltrude said, "The disease was so fast and aggressive, the treatment had to be done a year ago. But it wasn't even in existence a year ago."

His father saw a doctor on Feb. 20 and asked how much time he had left. "Soon," the doctor replied. He was dead six days later.

"We never had to see him wither away, and I'm very grateful for that," John Geltrude said. "But that's how the disease is. It cut him down like he wasn't even standing."

Shortly before his death, his family came to him with the idea of holding a dinner in his honor. Mike Geltrude told them to forget it. If they wanted to hold a dinner, make it about melanoma. Get the word out.

He also said his son was crazy at the suggestion that 500 people would come to the dinner. "You'll be lucky if 200 show up," he said, forgetting that in a lifetime of athletics he had touched thousands.

The coach had helped so many people over the years, and now it was their turn to help honor him. The tickets for the dinner were sold out in just a few days. The dinner