

# Cancer Can't Take It All

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At that time in my life, I had never seen such courage through heartbreak. Not once had I witnessed someone display that much strength amidst tears. My brothers, father, and I watched as my mom untied her head scarf, revealing her shaven head for the first time. Her lips quivered and tried their hardest to form a smile. That was the first time I ever saw a woman without hair. Despite the fact that society told me beautiful women had hair, I saw an angel before me: the angel of strength and beauty and every good thing in the world. At that moment cancer could not take anything from my mom or my family. If we could get through this, we could get through all of it.

When I was eleven years old my mother was diagnosed with stage three breast cancer. At that age I had no idea what 'cancer' entailed, but I understood it was something very bad. That May in 2012 began a journey my family had never asked for. For what it is worth, my mom did her very best to keep our lives as normal and consistent as possible. She rarely complained and always put my family before her, even though she was the one with the intruder in her body. No matter how hard she tried, though, our lives did change. Forever.

Just a few weeks after her diagnosis, my mom had a mastectomy. Thankfully, the surgery went as planned with no complications. The doctor also informed us the cancer had not spread. This was fantastic news for my family. It felt like a huge weight had been lifted from our shoulders, but this was only just beginning.

Soon after the surgery, my mom began her six months of intense chemotherapy treatments. This is when the fact that she had cancer actually hit me. I would tell myself chemotherapy was a good thing: it was ridding her body of the disease, but it was hard to watch the effects of the treatments become a part of our lives. My mom now had a much different taste, and meals she used to love she now could not even stand to smell. She would also be pretty tired more often, occasionally taking long naps during the day. The hardest effect of chemotherapy for my mom to initially come accept was the hair loss. As her treatments began, her hair would fall out everywhere: in the shower, in our food, on her bed... With the supportive presence of her best friend, my mom had her head shaved. The barber had shut down the entire shop that night to offer my mom privacy. That night when she came home she was very emotional. As young as I was, I did not quite comprehend the magnitude of losing all hair, but looking back now I see how challenging and difficult this must have been. This only makes me admire my mother more.

My mom's chemotherapy treatments typically took place on Tuesdays. Since she was gone a good portion of the day and surely would be tired afterwards, one of our neighbors handmade my family tacos each week on that day. This was the birth of 'Taco Tuesdays' in our family, which we often still celebrate. This was also just one example of the amazing love and support our family received from the community.

My mom taught English at the high school and was already a highly beloved teacher. When she announced to her students and fellow staff she had been diagnosed with cancer, everyone was devastated. My mom promptly let her principal know she would have to take a leave of absence for her

health and planned her last day. That last day she was at the high school, the entire school had been surprisingly covered in pink. On every single locker there were little pink ribbons and every door was decorated. All of the staff had purchased shirts saying 'We Heart Willy' (a nickname played off our last name, 'Williams' ). Her students had made a cake and gotten a pink crown and sash for her. This last day was overwhelming and showed my mom she was in no ways alone. For the high school's homecoming theme the following school year of 2012-2013, the students chose 'Touchdowns for Tracey' (my mom's name). To kick off their homecoming week, they invited my mom to come for a surprise appearance in an assembly. The support from the high school never ceased.

When my mom's more intense chemotherapy treatments finally came to an end around October 2012, I decided to throw a party for her. This party was dubbed the 'no-more-chemo party,' and I invited just about all of our family and friends. My aunt helped me decorate cupcakes and prepare a homemade movie to show. This day I always hold close to my heart; it was such a joyous time. Both sides of my family, along with plenty of good friends, joined together in celebrating a milestone in my mom's battle with cancer and thanked God we were almost to the finish line. I will always cherish my initiative to make that party happen.

Around this time period sparked a fire of hope in our hearts. My mom was finished with chemotherapy and feeling better all the time. She had even gone back to school, starting with half-days then back to full time. It felt like we had finally made it out of the woods. She even was in the works of creating our family's first Relay for Life team to help other survivors. She still had minor chemotherapy treatments on Tuesdays, but these were nothing compared to the first six months.

Tuesday, April 2, 2013, I came home from school with a friend. My mom had been particularly tired that day, but she still managed to scold me for eating too many chips before dinner. That night I said 'I love you' to her for the last time ever. I woke up in the middle of the night to my father's panicked screams. My heart shattered, but I was sure she would be fine; she was just giving us all a scare. I still vividly remember every motion on the way to the hospital. These few hours often play over and over in my head some days.

That very early morning of April 3, 2013, my mom died of a heart attack likely caused by her treatment medication. For a couple of hours at the hospital I would just cry and cry, but after countless friends and family kept hugging me, I only grew numb. I was twelve years old. I needed my mom now more than ever and she was gone forever.

The days after her death all blurred into one time frame. The house was rarely empty: we had an abundance of visitors bringing by food, cards and gifts, and love. I slept a lot and struggled for an appetite. It was not completely miserable, however, because my family would constantly hear hilarious stories of her we had never known.

Her visitation and funeral were wondrous. I stood at the visitation, greeting an endless line. The funeral took place at the high school, a place she belonged, in the gym. My family was kept separate until just a few minutes before the service began. I was the first of my family to walk into the crowded gym, leading the way to our front-row seats. As I walked, I was overwhelmed: the gym was full, there was not an empty space. One single person, my mom, had made an impact on all of these people. There were enough flowers sent to fill our entire porch, so all of my extended family took quite a few. This image only deepened my love and respect for the great woman I called mom. On top of this, my mom's

death was covered on the front page of our newspaper and on our local news station. It was then that I realized this loss was not mine alone.

In the following months, my mom's graduating class organized a benefit to help out our family financially. Again, this event highlighted the never-ending support our family received. A scholarship was created in honor of my mom to benefit a senior. To raise money for that scholarship, her graduating class annually puts on 'Volley for Willy,' which takes place at a high school volleyball game. A bench was also donated to the school by the class of 2013. My mom had previously been asked to speak at the class of 2013's graduation, so some fellow teachers read the draft of her speech in place. In all of these ways, my mom's memory was and is kept alive.

I am in high school currently, and I take Yearbook in my mom's classroom each day. Accepting and overcoming her death was especially difficult for me, but I try to live as she did, never missing an opportunity to put a smile on others' faces. To help other families the same way mine had been so lucky to be helped, I have been the team captain of my family's Relay for Life team the last few years. I have also organized three fundraisers at high school sporting events to raise money to split between the American Cancer Society and local families affected by cancer. Throughout my high school years, I estimate these events brought in \$4,000.

While my heartbreak over her death will never end, the hurting has lessened over the years. When a lot of people think of my mom, they think of her cancer that took over the last year of her life. While cancer is also a big part of how I remember my mom, I try to think of it differently. Cancer was a tiny part of my mom's life, and while it may seem natural to say it did not define her, in some ways it did. My mom was already a courageous, brave, and strong person before she was diagnosed, but having cancer gave the world a chance to see this truth. She had done so much good in the world and in no ways deserved cancer, but she was never bitter. Cancer could have blew out the light of her colorful personality in an instant, but instead the world watched as she continued to shine, brighter than ever.