

Cancer, More Than a Word

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Everyone knows the word cancer, but what does it really entail? According to Webster is 'a disease caused by an uncontrolled division of abnormal cells in a part of the body' but everyone knows there is more meaning to a word than just the definition. Cancer is more than a word or disease. It is a destructive force that requires a momentous amount of effort to fight back against. When people hear the word cancer they understand the gravity of the situation but most do not truly understand what battling cancer entails. Even fewer think about little kids in hospital gowns with no hair. When I think about cancer I think of myself and how this terrible disease changed my life, for the better. This is not a story of despair, but rather a story of triumph. This is a story about a child who grew from cancer, changed his life fundamentally. This is my story.

My story begins in November 2006, a month I will never forget. Something had happened to me, something had infested itself inside my body. The once energetic and constantly hungry four year old had become apathetic and unwilling to eat. Energy seemed like it was being drained out of me by some sort of parasite. Living had become exhausting, too exhausting. Doctors were convinced it was just the flu or an ear infection, they were wrong. It was not until a desperate emergency room visit that this parasite was discovered. Acute Lymphoblastic Leukemia, cancer. The doctors at Seattle Children's Hospital told me it would be a battle. They were also wrong. What was about to take place was a three and a half year war with every day being a battle. I started in the Oncology Intensive Care Unit, surrounded by family, which is where I was introduced to something I would learn to live with for the next few years. Pain, it came in many forms, but there was only one form which I would become afraid of. Chemotherapy, chemo, every aspect of it was unnatural. It smelled, it burned as it was infused, and it caused me pain like no other. I spent about a week in ICU and during that week I never was scared for long. I was surrounded by family at all times who were constantly making jokes and keeping me smiling. I would spend a total of ten days hospitalized, and those ten days were filled with pain. I was receiving chemo almost every single day and after ten days it was already starting to break me. The very thought of chemo would shake me to my core, I tried every stunt and excuse to avoid chemo. In the end I always ended up in the chair watching that green concoction slowly flow into my body. The next morning my body would be filled with pain. My throat would hurt from all the vomiting, my head would throb, and my whole body would be filled with this deep seeded pain. So deep seeded that no amount of painkillers could really make it disappear. This is when I learned that everyday would be a battle to survive. Not just physically but mentally as well. However my days were filled with distracting fun. From I.V. races down the halls, to endless amounts of popsicles, and my favorite playing trains with my roommate, Jay. I will never forget him. Jay was a year older than me and had been sick much longer than me, we became best friends. Friends bonded by a common enemy and shared circumstances. Until one day Jay left with his doctors, later that day Jay's doctors came back. But no Jay. What happened next is something I can never forget. It was the sound his mother made. It was not a scream, nor a yell, it was something more primal. I will never forget the look in his dad's eye, as if part of him had died. I did not know it then but these were the reactions of parents who had just found it their son had died. Jay was five years old when he passed and that is when I really understood that I myself was fighting for my life.

About a month later, after having left the hospital and living at the Ronald McDonald House, I slept in my own bed. I was finally home and stage one of treatment was complete. Daily infusions of chemo became bi-monthly infusions. A lot had changed about me since I had first started treatment. I had

learned how to live with pain. Pain had become a constant in my life, it was no longer a surprise. I took painkillers less than I did before, not because the pain had decreased but because I had grown comfortable being in pain. I grew used to excruciating pain with each step, with each breath, and with each waking moment. I stopped thinking of pain as something that was holding me back from living my life. I no longer let it stop me from doing things that I done before treatment. However even with this new outlook on life, my childhood had been in fact disrupted. Due to the amount of chemotherapy I was undergoing my immune system had been destroyed. This meant that one simple germ could mean my death. Meaning I could not be around kids my own age, go to the store with my mom, and even at times not being able to be around my younger siblings. While most kids my age were going to preschool and playing with the neighborhood kids, I watched from my apartment. I watched the 'normal' kids and thought about what I would sacrifice to be 'normal' again. I still had my fun though, my family always found a way to keep the mood happy. Whether it was from corny jokes, camping in the living room, building obstacle courses around the house, or movie nights we were always finding ways to have fun. Looking back I realize how different things could have been. How much more worse it could have been. My family could of been sad and negative during this time but they were not. If it had not been for this positive and uplifting attitude my family had I might not be the person I am today. During this time of great mental change, I also changed physically. I was now a bald four year old. I was now noticeably different and was extremely self conscious about this. I am also extremely thankful for this because it showed me the compassion of humans. My father, who is a police officer, saw what I was going through and in support shaved his own head. What happened next shocked me, his whole department shaved their heads as well. I could not believe it, a whole police department shaved their heads for some kid they barely knew. I will never forget how their small act of kindness made one terrified kid feel a little less scared.

Time went on and suddenly I was in second grade. I had laughed, cried, had fun, been in pain, but most importantly I was living life. Three years had passed since I was diagnosed and I only had six more months of treatment left. I still was not normal though. I was the kid who needed a year of remedial reading classes from missing so much school due to treatment. I was the kid who could not play certain games at recess for fear of damaging my portacath, a device inserted into my chest to allow easy and constant access to a vein. But beyond that I was the kid who had cancer. I scared some of my fellow classmates, because suddenly this ruthless killer no longer just affected adults. I showed them that kids our own age could be plagued by this horrible disease. However I remained optimistic, after all I had made it three years without any major problems with my treatment. Until then. In the middle of second grade I started to develop symptoms that were consistent with those when I was first diagnosed. I remember when a young doctor walked into the room and spoke directly to my mother saying how he believed I was having a relapse. Relapse, the most feared word after being told you have cancer. If you relapse it almost always means a death sentence. Now this doctor was young and new, he could not have known that this seven year old kid understood this medical vocabulary. When I asked him if I was going to die his look was one I will never forget. It was a cross between astonishment, heartbreak, and fear. He stumbled over his words searching for an answer when my mother provided one for him. She looked me in the eye and said 'You're not going to die if I have anything to say about it'. I was in the hospital for two weeks, each day I woke up not knowing if I would live to see the next. I was terrified, I was seven years old and was facing the possibility of dying. A possibility which was now right on my doorstep. These two weeks would change how I live my life. What was once thought to be a relapse turned out to be a blood infection that resolved itself. No relapse, no dying. However from that day forward I decided to live my life as if I would be dead the next day. Not holding anything back, smelling every single rose, pursuing passions with no regrets, and not taking advantage of the beauties life has to offer.

Cancer, 'a disease caused by an uncontrolled division of abnormal cells in a part of the body' . Everyone knows that for every definition of a word there is a real life example. I am that example. Cancer is a destructive force that requires a momentous amount of effort to fight back against. Most do not first imagine little kids in hospital gowns with no hair fighting this destructive force. Cancer changed my life, showing me the beauty of life and humanity. I have chosen to live my life not as the kid who had cancer, but the kid who beat cancer. I have been volunteering with the American Cancer Society to help one day end cancer for everyone. I have shared my story with a hundreds of people hoping to convey a message of hope and triumph. Hoping to inspire others, letting them know that this horrible destructive force can be beat. That everyday people can change the world. Even when faced with massive amounts of adversity there is always something positive to take away from it. My name is Joseph Yourkoski and I am a cancer survivor.