

My brother's battle with cancer

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I always wanted a little brother that I could watch over, love and protect, so I was thrilled when my parents announced I was going to be a big sister. I was so excited that I even helped them come up with a name; the name I chose was Payton. It felt like an eternity, but when my brother finally arrived I was so excited. He was the best addition to my family and completed us in every way. I loved reading to him, playing outside with him and teaching him all that big sisters teach their little brothers. I thought my life was complete. Payton was happy and healthy, always running around without a care in the world. However, unexpectedly he got really sick and after running multiple tests and taking him into several doctors, we discovered that he had a mass on one of his kidneys. After additional tests we discovered that Payton had cancer.

My life, along with that of my family's quickly changed in an instant and my world felt like it had been turned upside down. After surgery to remove his right kidney, we received a diagnosis that Payton had a Wilm's Tumor, stage 2, diffuse anaplasia. This diagnosis would mean that at the young age of two, he would have to undergo chemotherapy and radiation. After my brother's surgery, I put him in a wagon and pulled him around the playroom to show him the fish tanks. He loved having me pull him around the halls in the wagon. He also loved it when I would talk the nurses into giving him a rainbow popsicle. Within a few short days after Payton's nephrectomy, he started his chemo and radiation. Shortly after starting treatment my little brother became a stark version of the boy he used to be. It was devastating watching my brother go from being a carefree active boy, to being so sick and confined to the walls of a hospital room, constantly being poked and prodded with needles.

Payton who was previously a happy go lucky little boy almost had the life sucked out of him because of the treatment he was receiving. He was often so sick from treatment that he spent a lot of time in the hospital and in isolation because he contracted a vancomycin-resistant enterococci (VRE) infection. He would cry because he wanted to go outside of his hospital room and play. My mom and dad both had to work to stay afloat in the sea of medical bills they were flooded with and had to take turns at the hospital which soon became their second home. I would go to school every day like all the other kids in my class, but while other kids were planning their after school play dates, I knew I would spend my evenings in the hospital. My days largely consisted of the same thing: school, hospital, home and repeat. Payton wanted nothing more than to leave the hospital and go home, while I wanted nothing more than to have a normal life and have him home so we could play together again. I would bring books up to the hospital and read with him; I hoped that would help get his mind off of everything he had going on. I would also lay in his hospital bed with him and watch movies and rub his bald head. He loved having me by his side.

During this dark and scary time for my family, it was hard because I was so afraid that my brother would never get better. I was scared I wouldn't have the chance to play outside with him again and do all the fun things we did before he was sick. I had to watch my brother suffer and I felt so helpless knowing there was nothing I could do. It was one of the hardest things that I have ever had to endure. My family and I had to rely on each other and we developed a bond that is unbreakable. This experience has forever changed my perspective on life. I have learned to count my blessings and live each day to the fullest because you really never know if it could be your last. I also learned to be grateful for your health because you don't realize how important it is until you lose it.

I also learned that even after the treatment for cancer ends, the anxiety and fear of it coming back takes a long time to go away. Following the end of cancer treatment there are so many tests and scans that 'scanxiety' becomes a constant companion for a very long time. Nearly two years following Payton's treatment, we received a scare when the doctors thought his cancer had relapsed. He had to undergo another major surgery to remove a portion of his liver, but fortunately the spot they saw was not cancer. Thankfully this story has a happy ending and my brother Payton has beaten cancer. However, the harsh treatments have left him with some side effects including some learning disabilities and challenges. He sometimes struggles with social skills, focusing, and difficulty learning and grasping new and different concepts. It's hard watching him go through these struggles. Because he has beaten cancer you just want it all to be over, but he still deals with some of the effects from the treatments he received.

All of the experiences I have had with my brother have forced me to grow up a little more quickly. Spending so much time in the hospital has helped me to realize that there are all sorts of people with various challenges. I have come to realize that we rarely understand fully what someone has gone through or the challenges they are facing. This realization is a reminder to me to always be kind to everyone we meet and to also be looking for opportunities to serve those people around us who are facing challenges in their lives. I have also come to view things a little differently than I did before my brother's cancer. I now realize I need to appreciate the good things in my life. I also now have a greater perspective on life and look at things in a way that I didn't know was possible. Sometimes life isn't always how you imagined it would be, but I love and appreciate my life for what it is. I am a much stronger person because of these experiences and the relationships I have with my family have also been strengthened. So while things have not always been easy for me or my family, I know that adversity can lead to personal growth and development, which only makes you stronger in the end.