

Giving Up Is Not an Option

At age 17, my life was full, and my dreams were coming true. I had been selected to sing in the Florida All-State Chorus conference in January 2009, and I was going to China for spring break!

Inexplicably, I started getting awkward nosebleeds. They began that January with a weird, random cold and then subsided for the rest of the month. But throughout the entire month of February, they never stopped, even in my sleep.

I had to stuff something inside my nose to stop the bleeding. I began falling asleep during class. Finally, my math teacher, Ms. Walters, one of my favorites, called my mom. Ms. Walters wondered if my sleepiness was because of my losing so much blood.

Then I noticed the lymph nodes under my chin were swollen. We were supposed to leave for China on April 4, and I wanted to know what was going on. I had been saving for my trip for two years.

Toward the end of March, we saw an ear, nose and throat doctor, who scheduled a CT scan. We received the results the first week in April, and they were not good.

The day before we were supposed to leave for China, the emergency doctor said, "I cannot let you go."

It really hurt. I spent the next week in the hospital doing biopsy after scan after biopsy. On April 8, my dad, my mom, Ms. Walters and my best friend were with me when I received the test results: "What you have is a malignant tumor, polyps in your nose ... "

I stopped the doctor. "Do I have cancer?"

"Yes, you do," she answered.

Everything after that is a blur.

My uncle bought me a pink teddy bear. I strongly dislike pink, but immediately after my diagnosis I clung to that teddy bear and drifted into a daze. As we walked through the cancer wing I saw kids of all ages—some playing, some smiling, some crying, some numb. I was numb. I don't remember anything except clinging to that pink bear.

Interestingly, it never crossed my mind that I could die. In fact, it stunned me when someone asked, "How long do you have?"

Shocked by the question, I replied, "Why would you ask me that? Ma'am, I am not going to die," and walked away.

I knew I was going to face the toughest time of my life, but I never doubted I would live.

And tough it was. The very next day, I woke to a finger prick and a "Good morning!"—in that order.

Though only in my junior year of high school, I had to withdraw. Hospital staff ran every scan and test they could think of. My cancer was labeled rhabdomyosarcoma.

It was exciting to start fighting the disease, but also scary and unreal. I felt like a test subject. I didn't start treatment right away because there was a national shortage of chemotherapy.

The staff taught me how to help my family and taught my family how they could help me. My sister, a cosmetologist, came to cut my hair. That was exciting, too, because I didn't like my hair. I had always used a relaxer and was more than ready to go *au natural*.

Then came the day I started chemo. I thought, "This isn't so bad," but the next day it hit me. I couldn't get to the toilet

bowl. I couldn't even move. My mother had to hold me and walk me to the bathroom. Chemo drains you of everything: good cells, bad cells, and even your appetite.

My doctors wouldn't let me leave the hospital until I ate, so even though I had no desire to eat, I finally did. I had already been there about two weeks and didn't want to be there any longer. A cup of applesauce was my ticket out, so I forced it down and held it down until someone walked in with the discharge papers.

Finally I could go home. Fourteen days before, I had walked into the hospital feeling totally healthy, but I walked out of the hospital with cancer. We may feel like we are invincible, but each of us is as susceptible as the next person.

When I got home, I was delighted to see my family had redone my room. (The doctors said I shouldn't have carpet because chemo shuts down your immune system, and carpet can hide things.) My walls had been painted two shades of my favorite color: purple. I would spend many days in my "purple palace," as I called it. In fact, within those four walls, I finished my schooling online so I could graduate with my friends. I refused to let them graduate without me!

About a month later, I started radiation. They tried to prepare me by saying it wasn't as bad as chemo, but it was the worst. Because the cancer was in my sinuses, I smelled everything. The beam caused mouth sores. I didn't talk for two weeks. I couldn't eat or brush my teeth. I didn't even want to talk to the doctors. One really nice doctor brought in a dry erase board, and they learned I had a lot to say! (This same doctor later took me out with her family for ice cream.)

My last day of radiation, which lasted about a month and a half, was June 20. After my last dose under the beam, it only felt fitting to give the radiation machine a piece of my mind, so I did.

I forgot the nurses could see me through a window, and one of the nurses, who called me Cookie, said, "Cookie, did you just kick the machine?" and I said, "Yes, I did."

She said, "Don't try to break our machine."

"It tried to break me first," I replied. (There was no damage done. I was far from a lethal weapon. I didn't have the strength to kick it hard enough.)

By August, I was borderline anorexic. I lost 50 pounds in three months. At 5 feet, 8 inches tall, I weighed only 126 pounds and looked like a walking stick. The doctors said, "You are way too small."

I was determined I wouldn't let another condition add to my problems, so I drank a lot of protein drinks and ate pudding. I couldn't eat anything spicy. Even now, I cannot eat spicy foods. My pastors, Karl and Dyrie Francis, brought me Gatorade. I love Gatorade—and I'm a [Florida] "Gator"! When Pastor Dyrie noticed I wasn't eating, she pureed food for me. It wasn't bad at all—it was my first steps toward eating again.

My church was amazing. People who didn't even know me talked to me. Members called and prayed for me. One member, Grace Brown, was there with me the entire time. She was like my own personal nurse. A lot of other church sisters helped me as well. They raised funds to help me get started in college and never stopped praying. Even to this day, some still pray for me.

One night I was feeling terrible. I believe I vomited six times that day, until the only thing left to throw up was bile. I asked God, "Help me sleep, please." I have never fallen asleep easily. But I found comfort talking to Him and slept.

My last day of chemo was January 18, 2010. A year had passed since I started getting sick, and finally my sores started to heal. I auditioned for All-State and was thrilled to again be selected. Chemo was not going to stand in my way. I was thinking, "This is the last time I have to feel so sick." During rehearsals, I had to take bathroom breaks to throw up, but it was a great day. All the girls gathered around me and said, "You are amazing!"

I am now in college. I have scans every now and then and am way more in tune with my body. I don't want to go through that ever again, but right now I am cancer free!

There have been some long-term effects. The left side of my mouth is a little lame. I can bend at the waist, but I can't bend my ankles, so I can't do a proper squat. I developed neuropathy, damage to the nerves in my hands and feet, but I still find ways to work out. I lost movement in my jawbone because of the radiation.

I couldn't even sing for a time. In fact, before the Florida All-State Conference, one of my teachers told me it was not a good idea to sing yet because it could mess up my throat, but I didn't wait. My tone is a little raspier, but I don't let problems deter me. I graduated twice—with my classmates at Miramar High School, where I was in the top 5 percent of my class, and with my online class, where I was valedictorian.

When things were stressful, I loved to go to the beach, sit on the sand and smell the salt. Even now, when I go to the beach I take time to meditate on where I was and how far I've gotten. Many of the other cancer patients are still struggling, but I had it less than one year. I am about to graduate from college. I thank God for that.

If you are struggling with cancer or some other challenge, I would like you to know that no fight is impossible. My scripture is 1 Corinthians 10:13: "And God is faithful; he

will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear.” Don’t panic. No load is too heavy. You can push through it. He is always there. You can always turn to Him. He will never let go.

Giving up is not an option—not ever.

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