

# Xenia's Journey

By Xenia Alexander

**My battle with cancer is a story I have shared many times in the past seven years. Each time I explain it, whether it be to doctors, teachers, friends or complete strangers, I relive bits and pieces of the battle. This patchwork of memories takes me back to another world, one that is difficult to describe, but impossible to forget.**

If my story sounds bleak, it doesn't mean to be – I just want to be as honest and real as possible. Having cancer is like living with a black cloud constantly hovering above your head, sometimes close, sometimes far, but always there. I realise now though, that every now and then, from behind even the darkest clouds, the sun can still break through.

The story began exactly two weeks after my fifteenth birthday. I was feeling tired all the time, lacked concentration at school, was getting terrible headaches and struggling to keep up with school sport. I didn't think much of it initially, none of us did. Like most teenagers, I stayed up too late, ate too much junk food, did too much sport, and never thought of my health as something that could be at risk. Even after agreeing to see a doctor, I felt slightly guilty that maybe everyone was overreacting and I was just run down.

The symptoms were so general and so subtle, I was told it could be anything from glandular fever to depression. After a couple of months with no solid answers from the doctors, I managed to get an appointment with a paediatrician at the Royal Children's Hospital. While I didn't know it at the time, she had a fair idea by the end of that appointment that something was seriously wrong. She spared us the details that night and instead called us in the morning, telling us that I needed to be admitted for some further testing.

I wasn't really worried, and even after needing a couple of blood transfusions for severe anaemia, I still felt like it wasn't serious enough to justify all this attention. I had no idea this was a symptom or a warning sign of something more sinister. After a week of tests and procedures, I still thought I would be fine, that this was all just 'standard protocol' for ruling out something more serious, like glandular fever.

How wrong I was.

Nobody can prepare you for the news that you or someone you love has cancer. To this day I still can't find the right words to describe the feeling – or maybe it's just something you never fully come to terms with. I do, however, still remember the exact moment they told me.

I had been in hospital a week, and it was early evening when my family had been called out to speak with the doctors in private. When they returned I immediately knew something was seriously wrong. I had never seen my eldest brother cry before, yet when he walked back into the room he was crying uncontrollably, barely able to mutter the words...

You. Have. Cancer.

Even writing these words, seven years later, I can feel the weight on my chest – the suffocating sense of dread, fear and despair all rolled into one. In that room full of people I felt completely alone, as a terrible feeling of emptiness overwhelmed me.

This numbness didn't last long, and pretty soon the questions flooded in: How? What? Why me? I had plenty of time to think about the answers over the following two weeks, as they did more tests to determine exactly what type of cancer I had. Looking back, this period was like some strange dream. I knew I had cancer, yet I felt physically well, and by all appearances I looked it. I had no



Part of my family



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idea how I was going to tell everyone that I actually had a life threatening illness.

I guess at the time I didn't even believe it myself, or fully understand what it meant. I think they call it denial.

When the hospital finally called us two weeks later and confirmed I had Acute Myeloid Leukaemia, I was somewhat relieved that I at least knew what I was going to be fighting, rather than some unknown cancer, (a prospect which seemed far worse). My

parents did what any would do, they cried and cried, they held my hand and squeezed it tight, they hugged me as if it were their last chance, and then cried some more.

I didn't cry that afternoon in the office. I wasn't exceptionally brave; I just didn't know how to react. I wanted to be strong for Mum and Dad and show them I was going to get through it.

The following seven months were essentially taken from my family and I – they disappeared into the void that is the cancer ward. This period is extremely difficult to convey to those who have never experienced life on the ward – it is another world altogether – everything moves much slower, each patient and their family is living life day by day, hour by hour.

While that was my home for the better part of seven months, I now feel a sense of detachment from it, almost as if I am an onlooker to my own experiences, wondering how we ever got through it all. People tell me how strong I

must have been to have conquered it, so brave to deal with it all. To be honest, I don't know why I survived in the end, and so many people close to me in hospital didn't. I wasn't special by any means; I fought because I had no choice. There were many days where I felt like giving up, and wallowed in my own self pity, and there were days I was still a moody teenager (even worse, one on chemo): bossing my family around and refusing to let anyone speak, eat, leave, or even go to the bathroom.

Yet through all this pain and suffering, there was always hope. Hope came in many forms: the doctors, nurses, fellow patients, family, friends, and the volunteers. I will never be able to express my gratitude to those who supported me, in each little way they helped to save my life.

Challenge was one of these saviours.

It was so important to have that support while we were all living in that bubble, someone who understood what we were going through on so many levels. The Challenge volunteers would come in, sometimes they would bring gifts, sometimes celebrities, sometimes just a smile and a joke to distract you for fifteen minutes. While their approach was often 'unconventional' (I remember a number of times David telling me to quit being a drama queen and get up and move around), it worked. They treated me like a real person, not a number or a disease or a charity case.

Some might say how does a ticket to the movies help, or what will an afternoon playing golf really do for sick children – I can tell you straight out. Any time where I didn't have to think about the fact that my life was hanging in the balance, was like having my life back if even just for one hour or one day. That was priceless.

To say the cancer experience has changed my life would be underestimating the effects it has had, and continues to have. The end of treatment only marked the beginning of a new journey for me, as I returned to 'normal' life only to find it no longer existed. While coming to terms with the changes in my life has been a slow and gradual purpose, I now realise that things will never be the same, but that's not necessarily a bad thing. While friends told me I should forget my illness, move on, and get back to living life, it's not that easy – and why should I? I guess the key has been learning to embrace the experience in a positive way.

I won't lie, cancer has taken a lot from my family and I – it takes and takes – but after it has finished taking, as ironic as it may sound, it gives something back. Cancer gave me valuable life lessons that you can't get at school, or in a textbook. My perspectives have changed and so have my priorities, I now appreciate the small things and value the support I have around me, because in the end it saved my life. I guess in that sense cancer also gave me the gift of Challenge, who have enriched my life in so many ways and shown me there is sun shining behind those dark clouds.

