

30 Days/30 Stories®

Garrett

Diagnosed with Acute Lymphoblastic Leukemia in 2017 at age 7

Garrett's story began on November 8, 2017 when he was 7 years old. He complained of a sore throat and he was running a fever so I took him to the doctor for a strep test. The strep test was negative, so I was told he had a virus. The fever lasted for 5 days and then went away. Two days later it spiked again, so I took him back to the doctor and got another negative strep test result. A different virus, they said. They told me to bring him back in a week if the fever was still there. So I brought him back at day 6 and then again at day 12, because the (high) fever was still persisting. At this point his doctor sent him for blood work, and first thing the next morning we got a call that the hospital wanted him to be admitted because his white blood count was low. His family doctor thought it might be mono. She said the sore throat was caused by thrush, but she couldn't figure out how the thrush was related to the fever. We would soon find out how.

We spent the next 3 days in the hospital while Garrett endured physical exams and pokes in his arms, sometimes 3 or 4 times a day. His poor little arms were so black and blue, and he was terrified. He just wanted to go home. Every day they told us that "this doesn't look like cancer.". They felt, as his family doctor did, that this was just a virus. But as the days went on and all the virus tests were negative, they wanted to do a bone marrow biopsy "to rule out cancer." At this point, we really didn't have any reason to believe that's what this was since we had a team of specialists telling us it didn't look like it. But the bone marrow test confirmed the unthinkable: Garrett had acute lymphoblastic leukemia. Our lives came to a screeching halt. It felt like we were trapped in a nightmare. I kept feeling like I was going to wake up and Garrett would be across the hall sleeping in his bed, and I would think, "Thank goodness that wasn't real!" But I never woke up from this nightmare. It was really happening and as much as I didn't want to, I needed to accept it. I had to pick myself up off of the floor and be strong for my son who was fighting for his life at 7 years-old.

We were told that they caught it early and that's why he didn't have the telltale signs of leukemia. According to these doctors, leukemia doesn't normally present itself with a fever, but in his case, it did. And for that we're so grateful. He didn't reach the point of his legs hurting and he didn't have a single bruise on his body. But he did lose weight and he was getting weaker.

He had a port put in his chest and his chemo was started the following Monday morning, on December 4th. He spent 13 nights in the hospital and missed 3 months of school. He went to physical therapy for 9 months because the chemo made his leg muscles weak. The steroids made his cheeks puffy and his hair fell out. No parent should ever have to watch their child's hair fall out. It was honestly so very hard for me to watch and accept. I didn't want my child to have cancer.

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His day 8 bone marrow test showed that the leukemia was gone! And his day 29 bone marrow test still showed no signs of leukemia so he was moved down to the low risk c ategory. This was wonderful news because his chemo treatment is less intense than it would have been at the standard risk category and all of his treatments are out-patient at the children's cancer clinic at Lehigh Valley Reilly Children's Hospital. We credit the doctors and nurses there with saving his life and helping our family navigate this terrifying world we were thrown into.

Today, Garrett is 9 years old and about half-way through his 3-and-a-half-year treatment plan. He's doing very well. He takes a daily chemo pill, a weekly chemo pill, an antibiotic on the weekends and goes to clinic once a month for a blood check. Every 3 months, he has 5 days of steroids and gets a spinal tap. Spinal tap days are hard because he gets so scared of the sedation medication, and the whole thing brings us back to the early days of his diagnosis with all the fear and anxiety. Steroid week is hard because he gets cranky, depressed and withdrawn, and it's hard to see him that way.

Garrett has been so courageous and strong throughout this whole cancer journey and he is an inspiration to his family and friends. He has told me that through this experience he has learned that he's brave and can overcome his fears. He has gone from crying at every port access to bravely sticking his chest out so they can stick the needle in and we are so proud of him.

Being a cancer parent means living each day as if everything is going to be ok, but fearing that it's not. It's a hard way to live. I feel like it's a balancing act between, "let's think positively" and "let's be realistic about the situation." There are good moments and bad moments in every day. And even on the best of days, the worries about the future are always there. I have always said that you never know what your story is going to be. I certainly never could have imagined that this would be ours.

Written by Garrett's mom, Andrea

If you would like to donate in Garrett's honor Click Here

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