

30 Days/30 Stories®

Rachael

Diagnosed with Large B Cell Non-Hodgkin's Lymphoma at age 14

July 26, 2014 will be a date that is forever burned into my mind and heart. It was a normal summer day for us. Rachael had just returned from her annual visit from my sister's. Backing up a few months to May, Rachael had suffered from some facial swelling that the doctors always attributed to allergies. They would put her on a steroid and it would clear up in a few hours. During her trip to my sister's the swelling never seemed to go away but wasn't at its worst either. I remember, we had just finished lunch and Rachael wanted to go swimming and had asked me to tie her bathing suit top. As I tied her top, I noticed how swollen her collarbone and shoulder bone area was. So swollen that all these bones couldn't be seen. She is very tiny so this really stood out. I immediately called my primary doctor. They had me bring her in with the hour because she then started to complain about having a hard time swallowing. They found nothing, but suggested we go for bloodwork in the morning and they would call in another script for a steroid. I declined the steroid knowing something else was wrong. As we pulled back into the driveway, a neighbor who is nurse at Lehigh Valley Health Network, approached me to ask how Rachael doctor's appointment went. As soon as she laid eyes on Rachael, she told me to take her up the children's ER at Lehigh Valley Reilly Children's Hospital. I remember dismissing her for about 10 seconds, when another neighbor came over and stated, "you're taking her, right?" I remember looking at my husband and saying it can't be anything that requires the ER. But just to be safe, I decided to drive her up. After that drive, our lives would never be the same again.

The ER team took Rachael in for a chest x-ray, and then we waited for what seemed like forever! The doctor came back and wanted to do a CT scan of her chest because something didn't seem right. With all these hours in the ER, there was not one split second I thought tumor or cancer. Rachael and I joked around, played on our phones and watched TV, not knowing what would come at us next. Finally, they came to tell us there was a growth in her chest and it looked like her lymph nodes and they wanted to admit her. Still cancer was not said and not even a thought in our mind. I guess denial had clouded our eyes. I remember it being very late when the floor doctor pulled me into a room and showed me her x-ray. The tumor was the size of her tiny chest. I remember him talking of cancer and I had to stop him and have him repeat what he was saying. The rest sounded like the teacher from Charlie Brown talking…. Sounds, but no words. How could this be? How did this happen? Why my child? Everything stopped. The next few days are a blur. Family in and out of the hospital, visiting because they had to keep her over the weekend. All testing was scheduled for Monday. This entire time, if Rachael was scared, nobody knew it. She laughed and joked around. She was always positive. I was scared to death, and she never knew it.

After all the testing, we had a plan. Chemo every 21 days for 6 rounds inpatient because it was for 96 hours. As that settled in, I remember gathering Rachael's sisters, who were 11 and 2 at the time, and my husband for a family meeting. We explained what was going on with Rachael. Right then and there we decided to put it all in God's hands. There was nothing else we could do. We would be thankful for everything we had and for whatever the future held for us and Rachael. We asked Him to guide the doctors, give Rachael strength and to see us through it all. At times that was easier said than done. When Rachael started losing her hair and she let her best friend shave her head, we all cried. It became a true reality. Through all the treatments, Rachael never missed a day of school. She begged her oncologist to let her out really late on Saturday nights when her treatments were done so she could be home Sundays. After 6 months of treatment on 1/19/2015, Rachael got a cancer-free report!!!

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Maintenance followed for 29 months with doctor visits and routine x-rays, but we always thought that she had beat this, and it wouldn't come back. May 2017 stopped us, again, in our tracks. This time it was like a fist to the stomach. How do you relive a nightmare? How do you watch your child go through this again? Why again? Just why? Now she was a 16 year-old girl, who was on the brink of adulthood. A girl ready to enter her Junior year of high school. Boyfriend, friends, cheerleading and all the other things that go with teenage years.

We were told chemo again then a stem cell transplant. Easier said than done. After her 1st round of chemo she lost her hair. However, being the positive force that she is, she didn't care. "It will grow back," she said. After the 2nd round of chemo, her body became resistant to it. Doctors wanted to try immune therapy or Keytruda. I was skeptical, but she breezed through it. She had the support of not only her family but the entire community. It was amazing. Finally, in January 2018, she was set for stem cell transplant. We spent 24 days down at Children's Hospital of Philadelphia. For the first time she was sick, I was scared. Then it was 24 rounds of radiation, which was harder than the chemo. She pulled through it. Finally, on 7/26/2018, she was given a cancer-free card AGAIN!!!.

Since then, she has graduated from high school, taken to coaching youth cheerleading (she cheered the entire time she was in treatment), works a part time job and is just living life as a normal 18 year-old.

Through this entire time, Rachael has always remained strong, even when I wanted to fold, positive and thankful. Her entire focus has been to get better and get back to living life. Nothing will ever keep her down! Nothing with ever stop her… not even cancer.

Written by Rachael's mom, Rian Andree

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

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