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Finding the silver lining



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As a new college graduate, Cortney Glass found herself at the beginning of the rest of her life, but a rare form of pediatric cancer almost took that life away from her.

She was working full time at Timken as a specialist and part time, about 80 hours a week total, and living with her boyfriend when everything suddenly came to a screeching halt.

“On 6-6-06 I was diagnosed with Rhabdomyosarcoma,” Cortney, 24, of Schwenksville, said in a recent interview. “We had bad news, bad news, bad news, and the final bad news was me being told I wasn’t going to survive my therapy.”

Rhabdomyosarcoma is so rare it can’t be researched as much as other cancers since those afflicted, traditionally children, do not survive for very long. The three children she knew with the cancer in her time in treatment all passed away. Cortney’s case was very rare in that the tumors began to grow when she was an adult.

“The only bad thing with Rhyo sarcoma, when you’re in a higher stage the odds are lower,” she explained. Rhabdomyosarcoma it is a soft tissue, highly malignant cancer that forms in primitive muscle cells, according to the Ped-Onc cancer resource Web site. In Cortney’s case, the tumor was behind her face and in her neck. “It was high stage 3, low stage 4,” Cortney said.

Rather than sit around and let the cancer take away what she had left of her life, as it had already caused her relationship with her boyfriend to falter, Cortney resolved to do what she really wanted — travel.

Her doctor and social worker signed her up for Crossing the Finish Line, which offers cancer patients and their

family a weeklong retreat to their dream destination. Cortney was chosen for a trip to Florida, but by that time her condition was so tenuous because of her treatment that they had to change the trip destination to New Jersey.

The aggressive chemotherapy she underwent, called VAC, had destroyed her immune system.

"I had out treatment for three weeks and in-treatment in the hospital for one," she said, describing how her therapy began.

On top of the chemo she had to undergo radiation treatments "which lasted 38 days," she said. "That's when I was at my sickest."

Cortney could barely eat, had bed sores and was in the hospital for 30 days.

Her mom, Colleen Glass, was there "the whole time, spent every night in the hospital with me," Cortney said.

"She was definitely my support and my strength," Cortney added.

When she was home, she couldn't leave her house for fear she might contract an infection due to her almost nonexistent immune system — one of the main reasons she couldn't fly to Florida.

While sick she couldn't be around her nieces "which broke my heart."

"I must say, that's the hardest," Cortney said.

Her youngest niece asked Cortney's sister-in-law "if she was going to die or be like me when she gets older and I didn't know what to do," she said.

On top of physical suffering she had financial worries. Just out of college, with no job and recently having switch insurers, she found herself struggling with costly medical bills and disability coverage that didn't kick in for almost seven months. That's when her friends showed their true mettle.

"Almost every month a different friend held a fundraiser," she said. "It's just amazing and I really need to say thank you to them for that."

The harsh treatments, while hard to bear, had a miraculous result: "I went from (needing) a radical surgery lasting 36 hours to a three-hour surgery where I had a large neck dissection," Cortney said. "So I beat their odds."

Her surgery was performed by Dr. Finer at Pottstown Memorial Medical Center, where she had undergone some of her treatments, and she was diagnosed in remission in August 2007.

While a patient at Pottstown, Cortney got to know Peggy Neese, a longtime proponent of the American Cancer Society's Relay for Life.

Cortney formed her first team during her treatments because she wanted to get the word out. It was the 10th anniversary and people she talked to didn't know about it, she said.

Neese suggested Cortney get involved and the team she put together walked for 23-and-a-half of the 24 hours. Cortney herself had to leave for three of those hours, against her will, because Neese thought she was too sick to be there. She was going through her therapy and was throwing up and severely sick, but she didn't want to leave her team.

That first relay her team was able to raise \$4,000 and \$5,000.

"To me that meant a lot because in such a short time my friends and family pulled together," Cortney said.

It was one of the few positive things she garnered from her experience with cancer, which has changed her in many ways.

“Before, when something happened to me and I didn’t like it, I’d just let it go,” ... “now I think I’m really 100 percent stubborn and more vocal,” she said.

That outspokenness has helped her pull together a 30-person team this year and she hopes her team, Pediatric Cancer — Cort’s Team, will raise even more money because Relay for her is about hope.

“Their point is to help cure cancer. It’s so prevalent right now; almost everyone knows someone who has cancer, and Relay is instrumental in getting the word out,” Cortney said.