

IN EVERY ISSUE

A Life Beyond Cancer

BY RENÉE LA FOREST

Winning essay: CURE's 2009 Extraordinary Healer Award for Oncology Nursing

In June 2002, my 6-year-old daughter, Delaney, was diagnosed with Ewing's sarcoma of the skull. As a newly divorced mom of three young children, I was understandably devastated, and I remember wondering how I would get through what lay ahead as we made our way to "J5," the pediatric oncology ward of Nationwide Children's Hospital. In the week it took from biopsy to diagnosis, I walked the halls each night, imagining the worst and unable to sleep as my daughter's condition worsened.

Chrissy was a lovely young nurse who had graduated a few years earlier and was assigned to the hematology-oncology unit. When we met her, she was engaged to be married to her college sweetheart, Chad, and had boundless energy and enthusiasm for everyone—patients, colleagues, and parents alike. It was very difficult to be down with this young, effervescent nurse around. She made every effort to make sure Delaney was cared for both physically and emotionally.

Times were tough in the beginning. We learned of the diagnosis—a tumor so large it was literally crushing Delaney's frontal lobe against the top of her scalp. It was Chrissy who held my hand when I learned that it was inoperable, and Chrissy again who held Delaney's hand through the spinal tap and chemo infusions once we began treatment, and yet once more as I learned the painstaking task of cleaning and flushing her catheter to prevent infection.

This young woman remained a consummate professional while bringing a positive spirit of hope and encouragement that allowed me to remain strong for my daughter. At one point in treatment, Delaney had been hospitalized for more than a month with a serious infection. My nerves were wearing thin; I was a single mother away from my other children and had not had a good night's sleep in weeks.

It was Chrissy who came in one evening, pajamas in hand, kicking me out of the hospital to go home for a night of rest. And oddly, she was the only person in the world I would have trusted to leave my precious daughter with.

Throughout treatment Delaney and I looked forward to the days that Chrissy would be on duty. We would watch the boards each day, hoping for one of the nicer nurses, the upbeat ones that made the difficult world of nausea, pain, chemo, and radiation seem to fade to the background when they entered the room with a new joke, fun scrub shirt, or a simple hug.

I noticed, too, how Chrissy's smile was not just for the young patients. Somehow Chrissy's positive presence encouraged her colleagues and parent advocates to see past their troubles and focus on the positive that could be found in most days if one looked hard enough to find it.

During the course of Delaney's treatment, Chrissy's wedding day neared. It was one day out of the blue, as she and my daughter sat discussing the wedding, that she got the idea—could Delaney be one of her flower girls? I couldn't imagine such a thing! Delaney was tiny, her weight down to 35 pounds. She was bald and gaunt with huge eyes and dark circles. In a wedding? This would be difficult, of course. Delaney was fatigued and the results of three months of chemo were making it difficult to function.

But Delaney was adamant and Chrissy was convinced that she could NOT have a wedding without her. With only a week to plan, a dress was found, as well as gloves to protect her hands from the calla lily she would carry (germs found on flowers can be a problem when your white cell count is low).



At the Extraordinary Healer Award ceremony in April 2009, cancer survivor Delaney Diggs, now 13, and her nurse, Chrissy Wilson, RN, share photos of Wilson's wedding. Photo by Glenn Zamora.

When that August day came, Delaney walked down the aisle of St. Joseph's Cathedral next to two beautiful girls with long hair and suntanned skin, and yet her fatigue seemed forgotten, a rosy blush on her pale skin. She watched the wedding as though it were a fairy tale come to life for her viewing pleasure. At the reception, she flitted around like a little bird, forgetting for one day that she was sick and bald. Instead she reveled in her pretty dress, the occasion of the day.

When it was over and I tucked her into bed, she told me that she knew she would get better, because she too would one day be married in a beautiful church to a handsome man who loved her even if she "never stopped being bald."

From that day on, her demeanor strengthened. She looked forward to Chrissy's visits and pushed through her treatments, eagerly awaiting time to play, to leave the hospital, if only for the sunshine found on the rooftop playground.

Chrissy embodies all that an oncology nurse should be—not because she allowed my daughter to be part of her wedding day, but because she reminded us both that there is life outside of cancer. I will never forget this inspirational young woman. The care that she provided exceeded the bounds of what is required by a health professional.

Delaney, now 13, talks of her to this day, and I believe Chrissy's footprint on both our hearts will never be forgotten. She reminded us about the positive, of what there is to live for amidst all we endured, and she instilled a spirit in my daughter that pushed her through treatment and on to the next wonderful thing she could find that would remind her of life outside the hospital.

Chrissy reminded us that if we looked inside of ourselves and found our faith, there was indeed a life beyond cancer.