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From Cancer Warrior to Basketball Player

BY DEIRDRE CAREY

When the social worker at our pediatric cancer clinic handed me a brochure for Make-A-Wish Foundation, she recommended a particular park for our family vacation. “It’s a wonderful facility, fully staffed with doctors, nurses, and round-the-clock care,” she said. After two years of dealing with my toddler son’s stage 4 brain cancer, I wanted my family’s much-needed vacation to be as far away from the world of pediatric cancer as possible. I wanted this vacation to be the stepping stone that would lead us back to a “normal” life.

For two years, beginning when Charlie was 6 months old, I watched him endure 21 months of chemotherapy and 11 surgeries. I witnessed his determination as he learned to crawl and walk while attached to an I.V. pole.

Then treatment was over. I couldn’t wait to hear those words, but they sounded surreal. There was no manual that explained how to build a new life after visiting hell—how to build a new life with all the changes cancer brought.

At first I was overprotective, and I feared leaving Charlie with anyone who wasn’t family. Play dates would have to be at our house, and if the child arrived with the slightest cough, he was asked to leave.

When I enrolled Charlie in a preschool program, I did what any overbearing mother would do: I bribed the other kids with candy so they would play with him.

On his first day of first grade, another boy at the bus stop asked Charlie how old he was. When Charlie said he was 7, the boy said, “You can’t be 7. You’re a shrimp!” I waited for the child’s mother to reprimand her son. She said nothing. My oldest son, Jay, protectively pressed himself against Charlie’s back.

From that point on, I made a conscious effort to let Charlie spread his wings so he could learn, explore, and play. Little by little, I didn’t react so quickly when he skinned his knee or couldn’t master a skill. I took my cues from Charlie, and allowed him to be what he deserved to be—a little boy!

When Charlie was 8 he was playing basketball and another child asked him his

age. The child snickered at Charlie's answer and called him puny. I took a deep breath, waiting for Charlie's response. As he straightened his back, he proudly proclaimed: "Who cares how tall I am? I'm a cancer survivor!"

Today, Charlie is a star basketball player despite being a foot shorter than anyone else on the team. I watch, amazed. And not a single day goes by that I don't count my blessings and recall a promise I made to God the day Charlie's cancer was diagnosed that I would do everything in my power to renew people's faith in miracles.

Today we are putting cancer behind us and celebrating every day, particularly August 26, when Charlie will be 10.

—*Deirdre Carey is the author of Hope, Faith and Charlie*
(www.hopefaithandcharlie.com).