

The Walking Dead

Grant Oxenrider

Southern Utah University

“Mom, my arm hurts,” I said. It started with a mild pain in my shoulder. For a few days it was nothing more than a nuisance to an active nine-year-old boy who, ate, drank, and slept sports. The pain continued, each day getting slightly worse. A trip to the doctor revealed a consensus of growing pains or a possible pinched nerve. The pain and discomfort continued to increase. Another trip to the doctor revealed nothing in the blood work and nothing new to report. The prescription was physical therapy as my arm became immobile. Another test was to remove fluid from the affected area, which returned no results. With my arm unable to support itself, I began to wear a sling. The physical therapy consisted of electrical shock and repeated movement. As physical therapy continued, my condition worsened. One task I remember in particular consisted of stacking cups up as high as I could while remaining seated. When I would reach a couple cups high my arm just refused to go any higher. Doctors were puzzled, and with no improvement in sight my dad suggested a trip to the Minneapolis Children’s Hospital.

Children’s Hospital proved to be a wise choice on my parents’ behalf. This shoulder was nothing more than a stubborn criminal suspect refusing to give the slightest hint of motive. I underwent many tests, most showing nothing to explain my immobile shoulder. Finally, a test produced a positive result to my ailment. My parents sat next to my bed, tears rolling down their faces, noses sniffing, while my nine-year-old brain tried to decipher what was happening. My parents looked at me and said the words that no one wants to hear, “Grant, you have cancer,” and my mom broke down in tears. My head was spinning out of control and my body numbing as seconds felt like minutes. My mind went blank; I felt like I was entering a deep dark hole and tumbling wildly out of control, the room narrowed and began to go out of focus. I knew things

were bad at that moment, as I watched my parents crumble in front of me. I had heard the word before, but what did it mean? Raw emotion filled the room. Looking back, I cannot imagine the feelings my parents' had to endure to get the word "cancer" out of their mouths.

I learned I would be undergoing a series of harsh medications for the next three years. The disease I would begin to battle to the death had a name, A.L.L. or Acute Lymphoblastic Leukemia. The reason for my immobile arm was cancer cells clumping in my shoulder, which was a rare symptom to have. Treatment would begin immediately, and I was moved from the 4th floor to the 8th floor, which was known as oncology (whatever that meant to a nine year old). Here I lay a mere nine years old and already in an intense fight for my young life. I learned of the imminent and possible side effects of the battle. Death was the worst side effect, others included losing my hair, fatigue, and plain out getting my ass kicked in every way imaginable.

The hospital and doctor's office became a familiar place and often seemed more of a permanent residence than my own home sometimes. It was not so bad; there was an awesome playroom, filled with all the movies, toys, and games I could think of. My poor sister, who is two years older than me, spent a lot of time in that playroom. She became a master of the arcade game *Pac-man*. She spent hours upon hours conquering the game, her name on nearly every line of the high score list. The kitchen area had all the amenities of a five-star hotel, including all the soda, juice, popsicles and cookies I could eat. There was even a jetted bathtub I could use. This place really knew how to make a child feel comfortable. The sacrifices my family made were as courageous as the battle I endured. I was never alone; someone was always there looking after me.

I was fitted with a strange device called a portacath. This was inserted under my skin on the right side of my chest; it connected to the arteries that led straight to my heart. This was to be

used to administer intravenous drugs, and to remove blood when needed. This device bypassed being poked in the arm by a needle, and was far easier to find than a vein in an emergency. Every time they used my portacath to get blood, or inject medicine in it, it had to be flushed with a saline solution. Every time they flushed it I could taste the saline in the back of my mouth, and to this day if I catch a scent of the saline solution when I go to the hospital, or even just think about it, it brings back the taste to my mouth. It didn't taste good then and it sure doesn't now.

My condition seemed to worsen by the day. I began to lose energy, my face puffing up from the hardcore steroids, and my body began to show the effects of the harsh drugs. On certain nights I would take as many as 15 pills. I was now in fourth grade, I attended the first few weeks of school pretty regularly; however, as the weeks passed my body just could not do it alone. I got permission to use the elevator, and I was given a walker. I was using the same device a ninety-year-old man should be using. This was not right; I was only ten years old! I kept my head held high and attended school when I could. I began to miss so much class that I had begun using a tutor. I missed my friends, but some came by my house to check on me, and some with their shaved heads to make me feel better about my hairless head. My head was as smooth as a baby's bottom, and my sense of humor never let it bother me. My favorite thing to do was polish it while in the shower with hair conditioner. I was not going to allow this opportunity to pass by without some fun. Halloween rolled around and the list of possible costumes was awesome! I dressed as Uncle Fester from the Addams family movies. This inspired my sister to play the role of Cousin It; I won a Halloween costume contest and she came in second.

Some days were better than others. Certain days I looked full of life, others I felt like a sea sick fisherman on a never ending set of sea swells. Life was tough for my family, but we always made time for fun. I had my blood checked at every doctor visit, and we always played a

game with it. We would guess what my blood cell counts would be and in a short time the results showed the winner. It became a ritual, which the nurses and doctors sometimes joined in with or would inquire about who won that round. My many complications began to drag me further into the abyss of darkness. I often felt alone, scared, and depressed. My dog Snoopy was often the remedy for these situations.

My treatment was rigorous, I had to receive spinal taps every couple months to inject medicine into my spine to make sure no cancer cells were hiding there. I had to have a couple blood transfusions, and I had to have intravenous drugs at home sometimes. The spinal taps were often something that really plagued me. Being so young, they generally put me under anesthesia to do the procedure. I always came out of anesthesia so sick I would have to stay at the hospital for hours trying to recover. I began dreading it as every single time it was the same case. They finally gave me the option to do them awake, and I took it! I would listen to music while curling up in a ball and staying as still as possible. If I would have moved, it could have possibly paralyzed me. It was rather intimidating seeing the giant needle that would pierce my skin and into my spine while not being able to watch. I was never sick after the procedure so I continued doing it this way the rest of my treatment..

One of my major complications arose while on my grandmother's watch. The right side of my face went numb, and I could not talk clearly. I was rushed to my mom, and after instruction from the doctor I was taken to the clinic. They found I was having a series of mini-strokes. I was put in ICU and many tests were run. Whatever caused this was uncertain, but I was in bad shape. For several weeks I remained in the ICU, and had several more stroke type episodes. At one point I can remember trying to signal that I was hungry. I was unable to talk, so I motioned for a pen and paper. My mind could picture the letters clearly, but I could not transfer

them to the paper. I was temporarily paralyzed. The weeks in ICU drug on and the nights were sleepless. I would lay awake watching black and white episodes of the original *Little Rascals* all through the night. In the next few weeks I was taken out of ICU and soon was able to go home. I was able to walk out of the hospital with no permanent effects.

Several months later, on one particular night, I took a turn for the worst. I forgot to take a pill that my body had become dependent upon. This sent my body into a severe shock. I began to have trouble breathing and chest pain. I told my mom we had to get to the hospital. She did not realize the severity of the situation until halfway to my hospital, which was a 45 minute drive. I began to know something was very wrong. On the way I began swearing like a sailor from the pain jetting through my chest; I saw a hospital off the freeway, I said "Pull the \$%#% in there". She refused, not knowing if they had the equipment to take care of me and didn't want to waste precious time. She was scared and proceeded to the hospital she trusted. When we arrived I was able to walk in to the ER, I remember feeling faint and saying I needed to sit as my knees buckled and I dropped to the floor. I was rushed back to a room, where they began frantically working on my body. The pain through my entire body was enough to make the toughest of men cry. My blood pressure was dropping to fatal levels and I was in a fight for my life. The bright lights of the room engulfed me. I couldn't tell what was going on, staff rushed around me like a NASCAR pit crew around a car. I remember cussing at everyone I saw, as the pain was climaxing. We were later told that it was a fairly normal thing for someone to use profanities in such a situation and often uncontrollable.

The night wore on; I was stabilized and put in ICU. I later found out that the doctors had told my parents the next 48 hours was critical and would decide whether I lived or died. I was kept heavily sedated and only remember little things from there to the next couple weeks. I

awoke sometime in the middle of the night to my mother's sobs. I remember turning to her and telling her in a gruff, abrupt voice "QUIT CRYING, I'll be fine!" I continued to fight off this round of complications and later in the week I was moved out of ICU and back to the 8th floor. I was kept in the hospital for several more weeks. I had a feeding tube in my nose and was kept on clear liquid diet. I had an unquenchable thirst and kept track of the time, as I was allowed only a little bit to drink per hour (smaller than a shot glass). I was constantly bugging my dad throughout the night to retrieve a drink of the refreshing 7-Up that lay on the counter across from me. At the same time as this, my grandmother was in the ICU of another hospital, with a broken back and severe complications. My mom was constantly running from one hospital to the next. I cannot imagine what she was going through. Her mother, and her son lying helpless in hospital beds simultaneously. She was nothing short of Superwoman!

I had a close family friend, that was a few years older than I was, come down with a similar disease. She was diagnosed before I was and had fought for a while before I began. She had fought a good fight, but in the end the cancer took her life. I found strength from her last words she spoke to me from her deathbed. Never give up! Those words fueled a fire in me, and I vowed to beat this awful disease for the both of us. She was laid to rest roughly half way through my treatment. What a blow that was for me. I began to realize I could receive a similar fate. My family has never been very religious; however I wanted to learn about God, just in case I did not make it through. At the same time my sister was struggling with making good choices and this could benefit her. We started to attend different churches every week until we found one we liked. Eventually, we were baptized in the LDS church. My sister had turned over a new leaf and this religion saved her from a lifetime of bad choices. She was on a collision course of uncertainty and was able to overcome the friends that drug her down the wrong path. If only one

good thing came from my cancer it was saving her from her own destruction.

I began to fight through my complications and the worst looked to be behind me. I was not out of the woods yet, but I could see the clearing through the trees. I began to build strength, I was growing hair again, and my daily medications were reducing. I was starting to become “normal” again. The last year of my treatment was far better than the first year and a half. I was able to play sports again; I was strong enough to play little league football, so my mom sewed a piece of foam onto my shoulder pads to protect my portacath. Life was returning to normal, I was still often sick, usually when I had to take certain medications, but for the most part I felt pretty good. I was able to receive a wish from the make-a-wish foundation. I chose to go on a week-long fishing trip to Canada. Everything was paid for and I even had a guide. Of course my family was there too. It was one of the greatest experiences I have ever had, and memories that last a lifetime.

My body was nearing the end of the pure hell that the medications threw at it, but I always came out on top. By the end of the third year my status went from cancer patient to cancer survivor. I am currently going on 16 years since I ended treatment. Every day since then I have felt grateful to be alive. I feel like the walking dead, I should not even be here today. I try to make every day interesting. If I want to do something I do it, and I do it the best I can, because who knows what tomorrow will bring.