



Surviving with a Smile

For Nick Kaufman, fighting leukemia is a test of mind over matter.

THE SCAR ON NICK KAUFMAN'S CHEST MAKES IT IMPOSSIBLE FOR HIM TO FORGET A PAINFUL TIME IN HIS YOUNG LIFE. It's where an external IV port connected him to the chemotherapy treatment used to fight the acute myelogenous leukemia (AML) he was diagnosed with nearly a year and a half ago, at just age 13.

After enduring a battle that thoroughly wiped him out for more than five months, it would be easy for the scar to haunt the ninth-grader at Maple Grove Junior High. Yet, Kaufman chooses to look back and smile. "It taught me how much people actually care about me," he says. "Your attitude is everything. You can do things

you don't even think you can do as long as you have the right attitude."

Diagnosis

About a month prior to his diagnosis, Kaufman didn't feel "right." He was fatigued, he had headaches and bloody noses, and his knees began to ache. "I didn't really have any clue what it was," he recalls. "I just felt sick."

When his health took a turn for the worse in the last week of March 2008, he went to get tested for a parasite. It came back negative. A week later he went to a pediatrician at Maple Grove Allina to get his blood



For more information on leukemia and how to donate money to help leukemia patients, visit the Leukemia & Lymphoma Society website at leukemia.org.

tested. When the results came back, Kaufman and his family were informed that Nick had AML. He was then directed to get treated immediately at Children's Hospital in Minneapolis, where he was told he'd have to receive chemotherapy and should plan to stay in the hospital for about six to seven months.

AML is a fast-growing cancer of the blood and bone marrow that about one in five children with leukemia has, according to the Leukemia & Lymphoma Society. With this type of cancer, bone marrow makes unformed cells called blasts, which usually develop into blood cells or platelets that are unable to fight infections and can grow quickly to crowd out the normal blood cells a body needs. More than 11,900 new cases of AML occur in the United States each year, mostly in adults, with the average age of diagnosis being 65. Kaufman was a rare case, but one question that never came out his mouth was "why me?"

That's what taught Sue Kaufman how strong her son was. "His motto throughout the treatment was 'mind over matter,'" she says. "He was going to fight it. He wasn't going to let it all bring him down. He was determined."

Fighting Back

Kaufman knew his life was going to change dramatically. But he also knew that his reaction to that change was up to him. Five rounds of chemotherapy took his hair and left him feeling weak and sick. "It's not good to feel that bad," Kaufman says. "The worst part was when you really don't feel good after the treatment and you can't do anything for a few days. That was just horrible, but then it gets better. You start feeling better when you're in the hospital and you have visitors."

Kaufman had plenty of them. Family members, friends and coaches came to be by his side, flooding him with gifts and encouragement. As the word spread about Nick's condition, the Kaufman family received support from people they didn't even know from the local community. People who he never met wrote on his Caring Bridge website, and he even received a series of gifts from an anonymous source, who the Kaufman family labeled the "mystery giver." "I just knew that people were praying for me

and wanted me to get better," Nick says. "It meant a lot that not just me and my family, but other people, cared."


Kaufman used that support as inspiration to remain positive, no matter how bad he felt. His optimistic and humorous attitude rubbed off on those around him, including his nurse Carrie Thom, who cared for him through most of his stay. She remembers Kaufman, who sometimes terrorized the nursing staff with a remote control helicopter, asking her if she thought 14-year-old boys appreciated the fact that a majority of nurses wear floral or feminine scrub tops. The next day she put special consideration into her work attire, wearing scrubs decorated in super heroes. "I asked him if that was better for a 14-year-old boy and he stated, 'Oh yeah. Guys in tights. Much better,'" she says. "He always knew how to make us laugh. He's the type of kid who made you realize why you love your job."

Road to Recovery

Kaufman was released from the hospital on Sept. 17, 2008, cancer free. As soon as his platelet count built up enough to allow him to partake in any sort of physical activity, Kaufman started biking and rollerblading with his friends to his favorite restaurant: Chipotle. His appetite was back, he started gaining back weight, and he was even able to skate at Bantam hockey tryouts in October.

Little did Nick know, he was soon to be skating with much larger company. This past March, the Make-A-Wish Foundation granted Nick a trip to Detroit to meet the Detroit Red Wings, his favorite team. Joined by his parents and siblings, Nick was able to meet and skate with his favorite player, Nicklas Lidstrom. "I was just having a blast with those guys; they were so nice," Nick says. "It took me a few days to let it sink in. Now, it's just like, 'I can't believe that happened.'"

To the surprise of nobody, Nick, who has remained in remission since his release, chooses to look back on his trying time the same as when he was sick in his hospital bed: thinking positively and cherishing the people who helped him. "People didn't forget who I was," Nick says. "People were finding out more of who I was." //



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