

'So thankful to be alive'

For senior pictures, Bree Town, 18, returns to the children's hospital where she spent months of her childhood.

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Many high school seniors choose meaningful places to pose for their senior pictures.

Bree Town has known for years the eventual location of her special spot: [Spectrum Health Helen DeVos Children's Hospital](#).

"It feels like a home to me because I lived there for so long," said Bree, 18, a senior at Greenville High School. "I wanted to show that I am connected to the hospital in a very emotional way."

Despite the many challenges she faced there as she fought leukemia—not once, but twice—she has many fond memories within the hospital's walls.

She made new friends, played and learned with the [Child and Family Life team](#), bonded with nurses and doctors and enjoyed visits from family and friends.

"I mostly think positive about being there," Bree said.

To her mother, Jennifer, that's nothing short of a miracle.

"She associates the hospital with a very positive experience, which I'm very thankful for," Jennifer said. "There were some really, really tough days there."

Jennifer looked on in October 2021 as Bree, flashing her bright smile, posed at the hospital where she lived for a total of about 370 days of her childhood.

She recreated one particular photo from when she was a little girl, outside the children's hospital entrance.

Bree emailed the finished photos to members of her transplant team at the hospital, along with a note that said, "I'm so thankful to be alive."



Bree Town's first trip to Helen DeVos Children's Hospital was in 2012 when she was just 8 years old. (Taylor Ballek | Spectrum Health Beat)

A blanket and a puppy

Her first trip to Helen DeVos Children's Hospital came one day in 2012.

She was 8 years old and in second grade.

Jennifer had taken Bree to the doctor earlier that day with a low-grade fever, thinking she might have strep throat.

Her doctor ordered some lab tests because of some earlier unexplained bruises. Later that night, the doctor called and asked them to quickly go to nearby [Spectrum Health United Hospital](#) for more blood work.

The results were not good. It looked like Bree might have leukemia.

The doctor asked them to go to Helen DeVos Children's Hospital right away, not even stopping at home first.

Bree's father, Chris, drove while she sat in the back seat with her mother. All they had with them was Bree's favorite blanket and her brown stuffed puppy.

Doctors met them at the emergency department.

The hours and days that followed were a whirlwind.

Blood transfusions to raise her hemoglobin level. Surgery to place a central line. Meetings with oncologists. And then, the final diagnosis.

Bree had acute myeloid leukemia.

In her treatment plan, Bree received inpatient chemotherapy, requiring her to stay at the hospital from May to December 2012.

That worked for a while, until she relapsed in November 2013. She would need a bone marrow transplant.

Within six weeks, the team at the hospital had secured a young man in Germany as a donor.

She underwent a successful bone marrow transplant on Feb. 5, 2014.

"It's been great because she has not relapsed since then," Jennifer said. "The type of leukemia she has relapses a lot."

There have been challenges along the way, though.

When Bree was in sixth grade in 2016, her parents and doctors thought she had indeed relapsed again.

Instead, it turned out she had an extremely rare form of chicken pox called zoster sine herpete that had wrapped itself around a nerve, making her unable to walk.

“She had to relearn how to walk and one leg would not work at all,” Jennifer said.

She spent six weeks at the hospital and then went to Mary Free Bed Rehabilitation Hospital for intensive therapy. After months of steroid treatment and then more physical therapy at home, she healed.

The art of giving

To now see Bree soaring through the air as the flyer on her cheerleading squad during football season, you’d never know the struggles she has endured.

She also performs with a dance group, does gymnastics, enjoys an active social life with friends and works hard with an academic tutor.

“She’s an extremely active girl,” Jennifer said. “It’s hard to keep up with her, but it’s fun.”

Bree still returns to the hospital for annual meetings and tests with her transplant team. She’s under the care of a cardiologist to monitor her heart.

Meanwhile, she’s enjoying senior year and making plans for college.

She wants to attend Montcalm Community College for two years. On her list of potential careers? A nurse—“I feel like I know a lot about that,” she says—or an English teacher, because she loves to write.

Those many days in the hospital stay with her, though.

Bree remembers clearly the day [Sharon Smith, MD](#), a pediatric oncologist, gave her a Justin Bieber T-shirt early on in her treatment. She still has it.

Dr. Smith remembers, too.

“We have a close relationship with these kids and their families and we try to make it as positive as we can,” Dr. Smith said.

That sometimes includes a little bribery in the form of Justin Bieber T-shirts, she joked.

“It’s really important to us to try and make the kids’ time here in the hospital and the clinic be something they remember with fondness,” Dr. Smith said. “Child Life is immeasurable in terms of their effect on that. The kids can play and sing and have a good time while they’re getting infusions and chemo.”

Bree’s outlook for the future is great, Dr. Smith said.

“At this point, her chances of relapse are incredibly low,” Dr. Smith said. “She’s doing beautifully and I hope she gets to do whatever she wants in life.”

Jennifer is grateful that Dr. Smith and the health team cared for all of Bree, beyond just the medical side.

“I really appreciate the effort the doctors and the staff take in order to connect with these kids because I really feel like it’s key to their survival,” she said.

Sarah Straveler, Bree’s clinical coordinator, met Bree on the first day and has stayed with her until now.

“It is awesome to have known her when she was just a little girl and playing with tiny dolls and toy animals to now, talking about her school dances,” Sarah said.

She was so impressed with Bree’s choice of a homecoming dress that allowed her scar to be seen, rather than hiding it.

“She has overcome so much,” Sarah said. “I think she’s a great inspiration.”

Aside from having her senior pictures taken at Helen DeVos Children’s Hospital, Bree has strived to give back to the hospital and to kids undergoing treatment.

To mark anniversaries of her bone marrow transplant, she had a party with friends and asked them to give “poke prizes” to donate to the hospital.

She also created an Amazon wish list for friends and family to purchase gifts to donate to children at the hospital.

They ended up with a trailer load of gifts, Jennifer said.

“It’s really hard for the kids in the hospital and their families,” Bree said. “I feel like it would be very, very hard for the parents because they want their child to be happy and not in pain.”

The toys serve as distractions from the struggles, she said.

“I like giving,” Bree said. “It makes me feel better.”

Learn more about the nationally-ranked care for children with cancer and blood disorders at [Spectrum Health Helen DeVos Children’s Hospital](#).