

# My Story

by Sara Polito, copy editor



I am 13 years old, and was just recently a student at Briggs. In April, 2008 I was diagnosed with Difuse Large B-Cell Lymphoma cancer. I started having symptoms in late December that past year or early January. Then, it was just loose stoules, so I thought I was just a little lactose intolerant or something. Then, that February, I had some hematuria. My pediatrician ordered a urinalysis, but found no sign of infection, and it cleared up in the next few days. He

recommended a second urinalysis, but I seemed ok, so we didn't go. A few more symptoms surfaced. I vomited occasionally, once every few weeks or so, but I just thought I was eating too fast, had some acid reflux, or something.

I felt like I was normal until about mid-March. I had another dose of hematuria, along with some really bad back pain and major vomiting. This time, my dad took me to see his cousin, who is a urologist. They did an ultrasound and discovered that I had some abnormalities on my kidneys. They sent me to the hospital right away for a catscan and an x-ray. After a couple of days, I got the word that I had Polycystic Kidney Disease. They said that they found cysts on my kidneys and an insignificant cyst on my liver. The doctors said that when I had the hematuria and back pain that it was when one of the "cysts" were "bursting". They referred me to a nephrologist at Children's Hospital Orange County. I explained to her my symptoms and she said that I shouldn't be vomiting that much and the loose stoules weren't related at all. She referred me to a CHOC Gastroenterologist (GI specialist).

Easter Sunday and spring break came after the nephrologist, but before my GI appointment. Easter Sunday I had another "cyst burst". I was really weak on Monday, but that didn't stop me from going on the Washington DC trip. My sister packed for me and my pediatrician prescribed some suppositories to stop my vomiting, which I got about two hours before leaving. I was really tired and on Tylenol for my back pain. Touring Mt. Vernon was really hard, which was the first thing we did once we got to DC. I felt better by the next morning, once I had a full meal and a full night's sleep.

Once I got back, I had my appointment with the GI specialist. He asked me a bunch of questions and said that he wasn't sure what was wrong, so he sent for a bunch of blood tests to be taken later that week. I remember being very confused that week. PE was becoming frighteningly hard, and everyone kept asking me what was wrong, why I looked so tired, and why I was so pale. I didn't feel tired, and didn't feel like anything was wrong, nor notice how pale I was. When my lab results came back, they discovered that my hemoglobin was dangerously low and admitted me to CHOC that night for a transfusion. Normal hemoglobin is around 11-12 and mine was 6.9. The rest of that week was a blur of

diagnostics, ultrasounds, scans, etc. They nicely let me go home that weekend after another transfusion because my dad was getting married to my stepmom that Saturday. I got admitted back on Monday, this time to Short Stay, for a biopsy on a swollen lymph node they found on the ultrasound.

I remember when they first told me I might have cancer; I was in denial, and didn't want to accept it. I remember feeling hate towards all of those doctors for assuming something so serious without knowing for sure. My oncologist, Dr. Neudorf, said that he was, on a scale of 1-10, a 9 on the fact that I had Lymphoma. Then the doctors said that they needed a better sample than the lymph node in my neck, and that they were going to do a lung biopsy. That really made me mad. Why should I suffer because they took too small of a sample? They said that when I was going to wake up with not only a chest tube to help my lungs re-inflate, but with a broviac, too. A broviac is a tube that goes straight to your heart that is used for IV chemotherapy. I was terrified; I was going to wake up with two tubes coming out of me, one of which I would keep for a long time if I did have Lymphoma. I was also mad; how could the doctors at the other hospital completely miss this tumor on my lung, and think that the tumors on my liver and kidneys were cysts? I thought my kidneys were going to fail in the future, I was not anticipating cancer at all. I was in the OICU after my lung biopsy. I had a chest tube, my broviac, (which I call my "plug"), heart monitors, and an oxygen tube.

I finally came to peace with the fact that I had cancer after I learned more, like how curable it was and such. My chest tube came out within the next couple of days, and they took me off of the oxygen as well. After I thought about it, cancer came as a relief. It explained all of my bizarre symptoms, the doctors would be able to get rid of it, and after a little less than a year, it could be like nothing ever happened. I was in the OICU for about a week, with a very small dose of chemo already in me, then they moved me back to the normal oncology floor. I was kind of bummed when they told me they were moving me out of my cozy, private, corner room, until they showed me my new room. I was moved to the nicest room on the oncology floor. It has wood floors, a big window, a new TV, and some really nice cabinet storage. Sure, I didn't get the room to myself anymore, but I really didn't mind some company.

After a few days, they started me on my second round of chemo. I am completely ok with the fact that I have cancer, and am responding incredibly well to the chemotherapy. I have a normal life to look forward to, and I am content knowing that. I just won't be able to go out and do many normal things, like school, swimming, or going anywhere where there could be too many germs. My low platelet and white blood cell count could turn the smallest cold into a life threatening illness. So, slowly I will get better. My chemotherapy should be completely over with by next winter, assuming everything goes as well as planned, and I will be healthy again.