

Fighting for Life

BY KIMBERLY GRAHAM

Cancer changed one radiation therapy student's life, but not her goals.

I'D KNOWN BEFORE I GRADUATED FROM HIGH SCHOOL that I wanted to become a radiation therapist. But in May 2008, three weeks before graduation, I was in a car accident that changed my life forever. During my medical evaluation after the accident, doctors found a 2-pound tumor on my left lung. I underwent a nine-hour surgery for tumor removal — a grueling operation that required removing not just the tumor but most of my lung and a rib.

The medical team believed I had an extremely rare cancer called primitive neuroectodermal tumor. PNET is part of the Ewing sarcoma tumor family — bone and soft tissue cancers that typically occur in children and teenagers. PNET isn't genetic or environmental, but it's thought to start in fetal or embryonic tissue and then develop into nerve tissue.

Making it through surgery was just the beginning of my fight for life. I had to make decisions regarding my cancer treatment. The traditional methods for treating Ewing sarcoma didn't hold much promise, so I opted for a much more rigorous and debilitating experimental treatment. Over a 10-month period, I received chemotherapy treatments and blood transfusions for 21 days each month at Children's Hospital of Wisconsin. I also underwent six weeks of radiation therapy to my lung.

During that time, I also had to make a decision regarding my education. I wasn't going to give up my dream to pursue radiation therapy as a career. In the fall of that year, I entered the University of Wisconsin —

La Crosse in my home city and took online classes while continuing my treatments.

My treatments caused me to lose 30 pounds. I couldn't even walk from the car to the clinic. Because of my weakened immune system, I was in a wheelchair most of the time and couldn't be in public places. I was constantly nauseated, lost my hair and experienced many serious complications, including mononucleosis, shingles, respiratory syncytial virus and dangerously high fevers. My immune system was so depleted that I required 55 blood and platelet transfusions, which initially sent me into anaphylactic shock. My doctors discovered I was allergic to plasma proteins, which made the process of transfusions long and difficult.

I took 33 prescription drugs and was given six different chemotherapy and filgrastim injections to raise my blood counts. I spent many hours in bed, many nights in the hospital and many weeks at home wondering if I'd survive.

Although my treatments were exhausting, I never stopped taking classes. I was determined. My school work helped me keep my mind off of my cancer.

In the spring of my freshman year, my sarcoma appeared in my wrist, and

I underwent another year of surgery, chemotherapy and radiation. Still, I continued taking classes online. In March 2010, the sarcoma was found in the median nerve of my right forearm. I had no choice but to leave UW-L and my new friends, and once again, I started another series of chemotherapy and radiation therapy treatments, this time a nine-month treatment protocol, at Children's.

Cancer is a strange thing. Sometimes I think it's the worst thing that's ever happened to me; other times I see it as a gift.

One year of treatments and studies later, I applied and was accepted to the radiation therapy program at UW-L. I got to play tennis again, which was a big part of my life before cancer. I even made the lacrosse team! By this time, August 2012, I had been cancer-free for 18 months. Just before entering the program, I went for my three-month check-up and learned that my cancer had returned.

I was told that there was nothing more that could be done — no more chemotherapy, no more radiation, no bone marrow transplants, nothing. My parents and doctor found a clinical trial at the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minn., about an hour from UW-L. It seemed promising, and it allowed me to go to school.

Finally, I'd found some hope. At the time I entered the radiation therapy program, I also entered the trial. It required me to miss class once each week, but my classmates offered to take notes for classes I missed. Everything seemed to be working out well.

Three months into my semester and eight weeks of treatment later, more scans revealed that my tumor had grown. I was released from the study. Doctors decided to remove the tumor immediately, and on Nov. 1, I underwent surgery for removal of the tumor from my chest wall and lung.

I lost another rib and part of my lung, and what remained of it collapsed. I missed a lot of school during that time, but I gained so much more. I gained a friend in every one of my classmates. Although I'd only known them briefly, they visited me at the hospital and at home, copied notes for me, taught me information learned in class and drove me to school when I felt up to going to class. I wouldn't have been able to keep up without them.

Six months after surgery, I'm still cancer-free. Doctors tell me that another tumor will come, but they can't predict



LA CROSSE TRIBUNE PHOTO/ENRIK DALVI

UW-L Chancellor Joe Gow presented Kimberly with an Extraordinary Degree as her parents stood by.

when. My chance for survival is less than 5 percent. I don't know what my future holds, so I take one day at a time. There is so much I want to do — play tennis, travel, graduate, have fun with my family and friends and, especially, have the opportunity to help other kids with cancer.

Cancer is a strange thing. Sometimes I think it's the worst thing that's ever happened to me; other times I see it as a gift. It's introduced me to many caring people and random acts of kindness, teaching me what's important in life. §

KIMBERLY GRAHAM *has been an ASRT member since 2012.*

EDITOR'S NOTE: Shortly before this article was published, Kimberly's cancer returned. Despite that news, Kimberly planned to pursue medical options at Children's. In May, Kimberly was one year away from graduating with a degree in radiation therapy. On May 19, the University of Wisconsin – La Crosse awarded Kimberly a special Extraordinary Degree in honor of her exemplary achievements. Read more about the event at www.lacrossetribune.com.