

Discovering her inner strength

Despite diagnosis of leukemia, Brown sets high goals for academic future with family's support

DOMNIK ZELEK

Staff Writer

It was the end of October when the symptoms first started. Fatigue, fever, the works. Maybe it was mono. Maybe something else. Either way it wouldn't last long. It shouldn't, anyway. Maria Brown had things to do. Schoolwork and tryouts and anything else a junior in high school has. It was just mono. Just a virus.

That's what she thought at first.

Then the bruising started.

Volleyball tryouts. Downtown. Even though she felt out of it, Maria still went after a little push by her mother. After all, she was serious about it. One virus wasn't going to stop her. Neither would the bruising that it brought with it.

But it was a little odd. Volleyball was a pretty active sport. It was normal, right? Even if they were all over her body, it was still common.

But what about the bloody nose?

The next day she was at a lab, getting a blood test. Three times she went to the doctor. The first was fine. Wait a few days.

So she did. The second visit came and went, with the same answer.

But the third time she was sent to the lab. Just a blood test.

The bruising. Red flags went up in Maria's mom's mind. Lisa Brown's brother had had leukemia -- a long time ago. And weird bruising. It was probably just the flu, the doctor assured them, but Mrs. Brown specifically asked them to test for leukemia. Just precautionary.

One more day. Phone call. Maria was needed at the hospital.

"I can remember the day," Maria said. "It was Nov. 7th. And so I stayed over the night, and the next day they came in and they were like 'Oh, you don't have mono. You need to call your dad because we have some news to tell you.'"

A big group of doctors. It's intimidating. At that point, Maria and her family all knew something bad was found in that little blood sample.

Cancer.

The dreaded word. Two syllables. Often a disease reserved

for the old, but it isn't hard to find someone who's been touched by it before they've reached 40. Even rarer below that. You might see one person in every 285 develop it before they reach 20, according to the American Childhood Cancer Organization.

And a lot of that cancer is leukemia.

That's what Maria had. A clump of cells in her spine. More specifically, acute lymphoblastic leukemia. But Maria didn't know that then. No one did. All they knew was that life needed to be put on hold. All efforts put on destroying the infected cells.

"My mom started bawling, like, she was -- she was a wreck. And she came over to me and she started hugging me, and I was -- I lost it, and I started crying too," Maria said.

Disbelief. No one thinks this will happen to them, or even someone close to them. People never assume the worst because the worst never happens. Usually.

"It was more disbelief that it actually happened, because we just thought it was mono," said Patricia George, Maria's best friend. "Or that she was anemic, or she had a migraine. So we all thought it was so simple. We never recognized that it was leukemia."

Maria's brothers -- triplets attending Clemson -- didn't take the news any better. Maybe they were joking. Leukemia? Impossible. But it wasn't a joke.

"My third brother, we called him, he was like 'Y'all are prankering me, right? This isn't real?'" Maria said.

Leukemia. Such a weird thing. No one expects the worst. So many emotions. What are you supposed to do? Cancer isn't like anything else you can go through. Your own body turns against you, like a tiny war. And you get caught in the crossfire.

So people rely on technology. More of it every year. Better equipment, new chemicals, different approaches. Just so that you can keep going. And yet there still isn't a cure.

But it's not in vain. Survival rates have skyrocketed, especially for certain cancers like leukemia. Things weren't looking too bad. But that's not to say they looked good, either. There were still a lot of unknowns about Maria's condition.

"I remember the night that I got diagnosed, I woke up, and I was like, so freaked out. I was like 'this is gonna be the worst, the worst thing that's ever happened to me,' and I texted my brother and I texted my friends, like 'this is so bad, like help me out I don't know what I'm supposed to do,'" Maria said. "Part of the reason why I was able to cope with it and not freak out super bad was because I had my friends around me."

The first few months was intense chemotherapy. Every week something was put into her body. Shots and weird yellow liquid and a surgeries. No school, either. Schools are breeding grounds for viruses, which, if you know anything about leukemia, is the last place you'd want to go.

Leukemia is a cancer of the blood. For that period of time, Maria had virtually no immune system. Anything slight could send her hospital bound for a long time. But school is important, even if it might not seem like it sometimes. Missing junior year is about the worst thing you could do to yourself.

"Maria said, 'Mom, please don't make me take my junior year again, please don't let me fall behind,'" Mrs. Brown said. "There would be times where she'd be throwing up and throwing up and throwing up and go 'Mom, I can't do this. I can't do math and I can't throw up and I can't do this,' and I would just get mad at her. And then I'd feel bad, like, 'I'm so sorry I got mad at you but you're the one who doesn't want to repeat her junior year.'"

In the end, Maria had to drop most of her AP classes at Wando and take homebound just so that she could keep up with her chemotherapy. Even then it was hard. In fact, a lot of people thought it would be best for Maria to drop school completely, including some staff at the school itself. From an objective standpoint, that seemed like a good idea.

"Usually I would just sit in the infusion room and do homework," Maria said.

But who wants to be doing homework at the hospital?

On top of the work and lack of free time, a lot of these procedures were really painful, too. Needles and tubes and surgeries. Chemotherapy which made her hair fall out. So called "helpful" drugs that made Maria throw up her insides and felt like liquid fire coursing through her.

"There was this one chemo, we call it the red devil, in the cancer world we call it the red devil," she said.

A red-tinted drug that was too potent to put into her directly so it was spread out over the course of 24 hours. Other times symptoms from chemo would show up randomly.

"I was like, sitting at home and my grandparents were there, and I couldn't move these two fingers, and I was like 'this is weird,'" she said. "They called it a 'fake stroke' because I had all the symptoms of a stroke, 'cause I had slurred my speech and my muscles weren't contracting without me controlling it and stuff like that, and it was crazy. And my arms went numb. It was really not fun. That was the worst part."

Treatment went on until the doctors were sure she wasn't making any more defective cells. Then the treatments continued into Maria's remission. Last Christmas Maria could barely get out of bed. But things started to look better -- especially because of her attitude.



(above) Senior Maria Brown is embraced by her mother, Lisa Brown, on the front porch of their house. Mrs. Brown has been supportive of Maria's choice to pursue a rigorous academic schedule while continuing to battle her disease. photo // Peyton Raybon



(Bbove) Senior Maria Brown stands in MUSC Children's Hospital wearing a mask to prevent illness and an orange shirt, the color of awareness for her disease, while being treated for leukemia. (Below) Brown rests in a hospital bed with gifts brought by friends and family, including a stuffed bear given to her by math teacher, Beth Darby. photos provided by // Maria Brown



to take every week -- with more side effects than you could count on your fingers.

All so that she can go to school. Not many people care enough to do that. But Maria is an exception. She lost her classes last year when she had to do homebound. This year things are different. She has the upper hand on the leukemia this time.

"What I was in for those first 10 months was called intense chemo, or something like that," Maria said. "And now I'm in the maintenance period, which is the long period where I go once a month. They told me I wasn't gonna finish maintenance until, like, mid-September or something like that."

"And usually people don't go to school until they're in maintenance, because their immune system is compromised or whatever," Maria continued. "And so my Mom was like, 'Oh, but she really wants to have a full schedule and if she goes and she misses the whole first quarter she's not gonna be able to take all these classes,' which was not really gonna be fun, so we figured out a way to get me to go to class before I finished maintenance, which the doctors had never done before. They've had people try to do it, but it didn't work out, and so I had to wear a mask, and I had to, like, stay away from people, and I had to have GermX all the time, and I couldn't go to the cafeteria, and if people were sick I wasn't allowed to go. The cafeteria was a big no. And I could only go half days because I had not been doing anything for 10 months so my stamina was down, so I couldn't focus."

This year Maria picked up six AP classes. Six. Most people don't even attempt that many AP classes to begin with, much less do them when you have the obvious weight of cancer looming over you. But she did them. And she's passing.

Thankfully, she doesn't have chemotherapy as often now as she used to, but Maria still had a collection of pills that she needs

to take every week -- with more side effects than you could count on your fingers.

You wouldn't even be able to pick her out from a crowd and immediately tell that leukemia was, and still is, a very real thing in her life. Just a normal girl.

But if you knew her before, you can see the difference. She lost a lot of hair from that chemotherapy, and she still has that little port in her chest.

So what's the lesson here? What did Maria get out of all of this?

"We still spoil her," Mrs. Brown said. "My relationship with Maria has changed a lot because of the way she handled her cancer. We're a lot closer."

I remember the night that I got diagnosed, I woke up, and I was like, so freaked out. I was like 'this is gonna be the worst, the worst thing that's ever happened to me.'

MARIA BROWN

“

The dreaded word. Two syllables. Often a disease reserved