

Survivor's Battle With Cancer Is Over, but She Continues the Fight

One Survivor Pledges Her Life to Fight for the 70,000 Young People Diagnosed This Year

by Jennifer Duck



April 3, 2007 — At age 21, Sarah Gordon never thought she would hear the words "You have cancer," much less "You may need a cane, and you'll probably never be able to run or bike again."

The news from Gordon's doctor seemed to come out of nowhere. She had just finished a 500-mile bike race from Minneapolis to Chicago, her hometown. She worked out regularly to keep fit. Running and biking were part of her routine, and she also walked to class every day like many other students living on campus at Miami University of Ohio.

Presumably the picture of health, her first thought after hearing her diagnosis was "How is this happening to me?"

In her senior year of college when she was diagnosed with a rare cancer known as soft tissue sarcoma, Gordon first went to the doctor after feeling pain in her posterior while sitting. Initially, doctors thought it may have been a calcium deposit, but after further tests, she learned the softball-size lump in her right buttock was malignant.

High-profile cancer patients like Elizabeth Edwards, wife of presidential candidate John Edwards, and White House Press Secretary Tony Snow received a lot of publicity as they told the world about their cancer diagnoses during the past week.

But not every cancer patient is lucky enough to get widespread public support as they fight the disease.

According to the American Cancer Society, an estimated 1,444,920 people will be diagnosed with cancer this year alone. Of those diagnosed, an estimated 70,000 will be between 18 and 40 years old.

"These 70,000 voices are the smallest and hardest to hear sometimes," Gordon said

The True Feeling of Fear

Gordon was diagnosed with cancer in January 2003. She recalls the day distinctly.

"I remember being with my mom and checking our messages from home. My doctor had called, so we immediately called him back. I watched my mother's face twitch and she broke down to me saying, 'You have cancer.'"

The news devastated Gordon. She lashed out, emotionally broke down, and even physically broke down — smashing a window out of anger. But days later her mood quickly changed to optimism.

"I will beat this," she told a group of friends in her college apartment

She had to leave her college in Ohio to return home to Chicago. Two months and two surgeries later, Sarah felt weak.

Lying in her hospital bed at 2:15 a.m., Sarah spilled her feelings on paper:

"I'm less than 32 hours away from the injection of clear fluids in a green bag marked 'Hazardous Materials.' I'm lying here in cold sweats of fear. What happened to all those fearless and worriless nights? I'm scared, I'm really scared. I just want someone to tell me that I'm going to be OK after this intense treatment. Can anyone? God, do I have control? Do we have control? Or is it just you who has control?"

A Combination of Treatments

Gordon endured six weeks of radiation, two surgeries and five months of chemotherapy, in addition to many more injections and countless cold sweats of fear. She lost her hair, she lost muscle, and she was starting to lose faith.

"Death was a daily thought for me. I thought the treatment was going to kill me more than the cancer would," she recalled.

And then she made a frightening decision in the summer 2003 — to stop all chemotherapy treatments.

As a last resort, with the help of a family friend, she traveled to Lourdes, France, to visit the Roman Catholic healing shrine. For more than 150 years, the Lourdes shrine has been the site of many reported miracles, and an estimated 6 million pilgrims visit the healing waters each year.

When she arrived, Gordon was so weak she had to be carried out to the stone-walled bath filled with holy water on a stretcher. But weeks later, she was back on her feet and feeling better than she had in five months.

Whether it was the medicine, faith or both, she gradually started to look and act more like the same girl she was a year before. Her cancer is now in remission.

"I think it was a combination of the surgeries, baths and most of all the mental battle of believing," she said.

Throughout the treatment, Gordon had friends and family by her side. She had a support group of cancer patients to talk to, but many were older, and she found their stories at age 40-plus different from hers.

She decided to keep fighting for cancer patients her age, even though her personal battle seemed to be over.

A Promise Kept

The same late night in February 2003 when Sarah was sweating with fear, she wrote a promise to the cancer community:

"I promise you one thing, wherever you take this, if you let me move on — cancer free or not — I can assure you of something: I will do wonders with this priceless education you have so generously given me. Whatever decision you make, I will dive into this, I will start foundations, I will plan charitable events: runs, dinners, benefits. I will be an active member of the cancer community in every way I know how."

She has kept her promise for more than four years. She currently works full-time for the Ulman Cancer Fund in Columbia, Md., where she founded and organized a program called Run-Tri Together that encourages young people to raise money by competing in either half marathons, full marathons or triathlons. All funds from the program go to cancer support and outreach programs.

Gordon also offers support to another sarcoma patient through a group called the Imerman Angels. She talks regularly to a 28-year-old cancer patient in Chicago and reminds him how important it is to keep fighting.

Immediately after graduating from college in 2003, Gordon organized and ran in a 5K race in Chicago to raise money for the Ulman Cancer Fund for Young Adults. Since her first 5K, she has run three half marathons, two triathlons and will complete her first full marathon, the Paris marathon, April 15.

Fundraising for cancer is both her full-time job and her most time-consuming hobby. Sarah will be running in the Paris marathon and trying to raise \$70,000 for each of the 70,000 voices in the 18 to 40

age range who will be diagnosed with cancer this year.

Her \$70, 000 fundraising mission will continue until the end of 2007.

"I want to raise \$70,000 this year to educate the young and let them know they're not invincible while also challenging the 70,000 young people being diagnosed with cancer to embrace the challenge."

To donate and become one of Sarah's 70,000 voices, visit:
unmarathon.org.

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