Coming Full Circle: A Childhood Cancer Story About Acute Myeloid Leukemia

Seventeen years after two nurses saved a toddler with acute myeloid leukemia, a tweet revealed the depth of her parents' gratitude.

October 13, 2021 By Jeanette L. Pinnace

When children are diagnosed with cancer, health providers often have profound effects on their family's lives. For example, the family of a little girl named Maggie who was diagnosed with acute myeloid leukemia (AML) as a toddler growing up in Cornwall, England, formed a bond with two nurses that would transcend Maggie's stay in the hospital, reports The Washington Post.

Indeed, Maggie's parents were so grateful that they named a child after her nurses. But those nurses didn't find out until 17 years later.

When, during her treatment, Maggie experienced anaphylaxis in response to a chemotherapy drug, nurses Charlotte Higby and Charlie administered adrenaline to keep her airways from closing and "basically, saved her life," said Maggie's father, Martin Dorey.

Maggie's mom was pregnant at the time and after this crisis she and her husband decided to name their newborn Charlotte—and nicknamed her "Charlie"—an honor the nurses did not discover until almost two decades later.

The revelation went public after Dorey announced that he'd dropped off his daughter at her college dorm in a tweet. "Dropped Maggie at uni [university] in Bristol today. From her new room you can see the room at Bristol Children's Hospital [Bristol Royal Hospital for Children] where, 17 years earlier, she spent six months fighting for her life against leukemia," he wrote. "Tears of joy. Thank you, NHS (National Health Service)."

Everything about this we love. Especially with it being Childhood Cancer Awareness Month. We always want to be there for families like Maggie's, going through

childhood cancer.

Thank you @campervanliving for sharing ????????https://t.co/MjYvGFtThn

— Young Lives vs Cancer (@YLvsCancer) September 28, 2021

Maggie's cancer, acute myeloid leukemia, aka acute myeloblastic leukemia, begins in the bone marrow, the soft inner core of specific bones where new blood cells originate. AML can speedily enter the blood and spread to different areas of the body. Children with the condition may be treated with chemotherapy, radiation, biological therapy and antibiotics.

Higby saw the message and responded with well wishes to her former patient. Dorey asked her whether she was one of the nursing duo who aided Maggie when she experienced anaphylaxis as a reaction to chemo.

That's when Higby learned Dorey had named his younger daughter Charlie, after her coworker.

Dorey then sent her a picture of his two daughters together to which Higby responded, "What gorgeous girls!"

"Nursing in that field [cancer] often leaves you not quite sure how things turned out, so to see Maggie heading off to uni is incredibly special," Higby observed. "Beyond the nurses and doctors are the often unseen staff, including cleaners, porters, pathology staff, pharmacists, physios [physical therapists], play therapists and many more."

The Twitter thread unleashed a flood of personal stories from family members with relatives who survived cancer. "The reaction to the tweet has been quite extraordinary," Dorey said.

Today, Maggie, age 18, is in remission and enrolled at the University of the West of England Bristol. Her dorm room view of the hospital where she spent so much time is a reminder that the entire family shared this cancer journey. "It felt like we had come full circle," he said. "It was a significant moment in Maggie's life."

Dorey parlayed the huge response from the public into a fundraising opportunity for several organizations that help kids with serious illnesses. "There are kids who are still being diagnosed and parents who are going through awful things," he said. "Never take anything for granted. Be

grateful for everything you have.”

For another compelling personal story about an AML survivor, read “An Acute Myeloid Leukemia Diary: Siri Lindley.”

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