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Cancer Center

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It began November 2004. Andrea was in her junior year at The Ethel Walker School, an all-girls boarding school in Simsbury, CT. She developed a serious pain in her hip, which she attributed to the intensive dance program she had joined at the beginning of the semester. A trip to the on-campus doctor resulted in a prescription for a muscle relaxant. The drug helped relieve some of the symptoms, which, in turn, allowed Andrea to continue dancing.

Excruciating Pain

By Christmas break, during a visit to her father's home in Florida, the pain became excruciating. Still under the impression that it was related to her dancing, Andrea visited a local chiropractor. Again, this temporarily relieved some of the pain. However, by the time she returned home to her mother in New York, the pain had returned with a vengeance.

"I woke up one night, crying hysterically because I was in pain and no one knew why," Andrea remembers. "School had already resumed, but my mother would not let me go back to Connecticut until she knew what was wrong with me."

Probably Not Cancer

The path to diagnosis began with an x-ray of Andrea's hip. The x-ray led to a biopsy. The doctor performing the biopsy informed Andrea and her family that the results from the biopsy would not be available for two weeks but that the symptoms were probably not caused by cancer. "During those two weeks, my friends would call me from school, asking when I was coming back," Andrea says. "My usual answer would be 'within the next week.' But at the time, knowing something serious might be happening, I remember thinking, 'I am not coming back next week, or maybe even for the next few months.'"

Two weeks later, Andrea received a call from the doctor, asking her to come into the office. "I was in a wheelchair at this point, recovering from the biopsy, and I was wearing a leg brace because my leg was so weak that it couldn't support my body's weight," Andrea says. "At the doctor's office, we were led into a room with three chairs, a desk, and a box of tissues. The doctor came in and said that the biopsy went well, and that the team had come to a definite answer."

"Wait, Are You Talking About Cancer?"

The definite answer was that Andrea had an advanced stage IV non-Hodgkin's lymphoma. "My immediate response was: 'Wait, are you talking about cancer? Am I going to college? Is my hair going to fall out?'" she remembers asking.

The rest of the conversation was a blur for Andrea. "I just sat there with nothing else to say, looking out the window and sobbing, while the doctor continued to talk to my family," she says of that fateful day. Her family shared in her tears. This was the only time she would witness her family crying. "My family had their sad moments," she explains, "but they told me that we were all going to get through this together."

From College Applications to Surviving Cancer

Andrea's priorities quickly changed from college applications to trying to survive cancer. After the diagnosis, Andrea, along with her mother and aunt, spent a week visiting five hospitals, looking to find the one that would offer the best treatment option for Andrea. Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center was the third hospital they visited.

"If It's Cancer, We Want to be at Sloan Kettering"

"The whole week was so physically and emotionally taxing that all I remember is walking into Dr. Trippett's office at Memorial, feeling desperately in need of help," Andrea recalls. "I was sick and in a wheelchair. Dr. Trippett immediately asked to see my x-rays and biopsy results." (Memorial Sloan Kettering's Tanya Trippett is a pediatric oncologist who specializes in the treatment of lymphoma.)

Andrea was admitted into inpatient care soon after the records were reviewed. "I felt that Memorial was just waiting for my arrival," Andrea marvels. "I knew I was at the right place. I was scared and my family was scared, but Dr. Trippett and her team reassured me that I was at the right place to get better."

The Challenges of Treatment

Two days later, Andrea received her first chemotherapy treatment. As with all [pediatric non-Hodgkin's](#) patients, Andrea's treatment involved the use of a combination of chemotherapy agents. As her treatment progressed, Andrea struggled with some treatment-related side effects, including mood swings caused by a drug called Prednisone.

It's important for outside caretakers to understand [how sensitive a teenager undergoing cancer treatment can be]. Knowing this will help them to be more patient with the person undergoing treatment.

Andrea Coggin

"One day, in the middle of treatment, I was out shopping with my mother, when I decided I wanted a slice of pizza that I had seen in a shop," Andrea recalls, laughing at the memory. "My mother went inside the store to get me the slice. But she got me the wrong one, and I was not about to eat the slice she brought me. She went back in, bought the right slice, and brought it out to me. But then, as we were leaving the parking lot, I went to take a bite of the pizza and dropped the entire slice on the floor. I was so distraught from the Prednisone that I cried for ten minutes."

Andrea tells this story as an example of how sensitive a teenager undergoing cancer treatment can be. "It's really important for outside caretakers to understand this," Andrea offers. "Knowing this will help them to be more patient with the person undergoing treatment."

Andrea's family and friends helped her to get through the rigorous chemotherapy regimen. And when she is asked to single out any individual staff members who were particularly instrumental, Andrea mentions the entire team at Memorial Sloan Kettering, saying, "I've had so many life talks with so many of my nurses, doctors, assistants, teachers, and so many more people that it's impossible to specify any one person. That's the beauty of Memorial Sloan Kettering. There are so many different personalities in one place, people who allow you to connect with them on common ground — no matter what their job title is at the hospital."

The Best Christmas Gift

Andrea successfully completed her last chemotherapy treatment on December 25, 2005. "It still is the best Christmas gift that I've ever received," she says. "I knew that day would come for me, and I was so thankful for all of my family and friends, who were on this journey with me."



Andrea and her brother at a NY Mets game

Today, Andrea is in her senior year at Stetson University in Deland, Florida, where she is majoring in international business, with a minor in Spanish. During the summer of 2008, she studied abroad in Innsbruck, Austria, and she completed her minor this summer in Guanajuato, Mexico.

"Andrea is an inspirational young woman whose strength of character was readily evident in how she approached the diagnosis, treatment, and recovery from her cancer."



Tanya M. Trippett
Pediatric Oncologist

After completing her undergraduate degree, Andrea plans to go onto a joint MBA/JD program, which she intends to use to pursue a career as a legal analyst for an international corporation. If the determination she showed getting through her battle with cancer is any indication, she has a bright career ahead of her.

When asked to offer a final piece of advice to other teens and young adults going through a similar experience with cancer, Andrea doesn't hesitate. "The saying 'everything happens for a reason' is a cliché, but it also happens to be true," she says with confidence born from experience. "I would never take back my experience with cancer because it has given me motivation to live my life to the fullest and to love the people I surround myself with. Oddly, I am thankful for what cancer has done to me and for how it has impacted my life. My experience would never be the same without those angels I came into contact with at Memorial Sloan Kettering."

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