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Colleen

It was June 15, 2007, just three weeks before Colleen's 29th birthday. A running enthusiast, she had run six miles the weekend before in Central Park.

She was about to leave work when she had a seizure. "I was actually very lucky because in another five minutes I would have been in my car on the way to the Yankees-Mets game," she recalls. "All of this came out of nowhere."

One of her colleagues called 911 after finding Colleen facedown on the floor. "The first thing I remember is them putting me on a stretcher, and they took me by ambulance to a hospital in Rockland County, close to my parents' house," says Colleen. "I was with-it enough to answer their questions."

A Mass in Her Brain

At the hospital, the doctors did blood work and took an x-ray to rule out a cervical spine injury, but they didn't find anything. A subsequent CT scan revealed a small mass in the left frontal lobe of Colleen's brain that was confirmed three days later with an MRI. She was referred to a neurosurgeon nearby, who performed a biopsy on July 3.

The results of the biopsy showed hyper-cellularity, a term that means inflammation of the cells. Although they still did not know much about the mass, the neurosurgeon thought it was probably a [low-grade brain tumor](#), which would mean that surgery might not be necessary. He recommended that they monitor the tumor with scans every three months.

"He told me that there was some softening of my skull that made it look like the tumor has been there the better part of ten years," Colleen recalls. "But I felt fine. I had never spent a day in the hospital until all this started."

"You're Going to Be Fine."

Colleen and her parents got a second opinion from another neurosurgeon, who recommended performing surgery to remove the tumor as soon as possible. Feeling more confused than ever, Colleen consulted with her original surgeon, who got her an appointment with Lisa DeAngelis, Chair of the Department of Neurology at Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center.

"We'd specifically stayed away from Sloan Kettering," Colleen says. "You have to look for the positives, and I kept saying to myself that I don't have cancer, I'm not going to Sloan Kettering." But despite her hesitation, Colleen scheduled the appointment with Dr. DeAngelis.

After reviewing the results of a neurologic examination and the MRI films, Dr. DeAngelis told her that she recommended [surgery](#). As Colleen says, "Dr. DeAngelis told me that I'm never going to be any younger than I am today, and the tumor is never going to be any smaller than it is today. She said she would consider leaving it and reassessing it in six months if we knew what kind of tumor it was. But because we didn't, her recommendation was for it to come out."

Dr. DeAngelis arranged for Colleen to have a surgical consultation later that afternoon with Philip Gutin, Chair of the Department of Neurosurgery. When Dr. Gutin came in, he told Colleen and her parents that he agreed with Dr. DeAngelis' assessment that surgery was her best option. "He patted me on the shoulder and said, 'Colleen, you're going to be fine.'"

It was during that first appointment with Dr. Gutin that she told him that she was training for the 2008 ING New York City Marathon. "He said that he couldn't see any reason for me not to do it. And that's when he told me about running with Fred's Team." (Fred's Team is a marathon program that has raised more than \$32 million in support of cancer research at Memorial Sloan Kettering. Funds generated through Fred's Team are allocated toward research in pediatrics and more than forty other areas of cancer research.)

She thought joining Fred's Team sounded like a great idea.

A Five-Hour Operation

The days leading up to the surgery were extremely difficult. Although Colleen's parents, family, and friends were very supportive, Colleen describes the experience as being very overwhelming and almost surreal. "It was like I was on autopilot," she says, thinking back. "I just needed to do whatever I could do to get through the day, and that was pretty much all I could handle."

“Everyone at Sloan Kettering was just amazing. Everyone always has smiles on their faces.”

Colleen

“The saying I repeated to myself last summer — which my parents heard me say 50,000 times — was ‘It is what it is.’ I didn’t want to have a brain tumor. But I did have one and you kind of have to deal with it.”

The five-hour-long procedure took place two weeks later, on August 7. Dr. Gutin was able to remove the tumor, and the pathology report showed that Colleen had an oligodendroglioma, which is a rare, slow-growing tumor that begins in the cells that cover and protect nerve cells in the brain and spinal cord known as oligodendrocytes.

She went home a few days later and was able to go back to her job in September. No further treatment was necessary, and her doctors conduct surveillance imaging every three months.

Fred’s Team

Soon after surgery, Colleen resumed her training schedule and was able to reach her goal of qualifying for a spot in the ING New York City Marathon, on November 2, 2008. She took Dr. Gutin’s advice and joined Fred’s Team, choosing to earmark the money she raises for the Brain Tumor Center at Memorial Sloan Kettering.



Colleen

“I feel kind of guilty saying this, but donating to brain tumor research is like an investment in my future,” Colleen says with emotion. “There was a lot of research done before I was diagnosed, allowing my surgery to turn out as well as I did. So it’s a thank-you to all those people who donated money before I was diagnosed. And it’s also a thank-you to Dr. Gutin and Dr. DeAngelis for taking such good care of me.”

“This Has Completely Changed My Life”

Looking back on this very hard chapter of her life, Colleen realizes that she is a different person now than she was before her diagnosis.

“You think you’re invincible,” she says. “This has completely changed my life. It’s a cliché to say, but this has changed my outlook on everything. I no longer get upset about the little things and don’t take life for granted any more.”

On her experience at Memorial Sloan Kettering, she says, “Everyone at Sloan Kettering was just amazing. Everyone always has smiles on their faces. It really makes a difference because people are not always there for good reasons.”

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