

Mandy's Story

Mandy Atwal was diagnosed with acute promyelocytic leukemia (a sub-type of AML) in 2003

MY name is Mandy. I am not a patient. I am not a statistic. I am a survivor. Living proof that miracles do happen.

Being a healthy, active 24-year-old with lots of life to live, I would have never imagined that I would be hit with such a devastating illness. At the time, my worries in life ranged from small things, such as what colour I was going to put in my hair, to the biggest thing being school assignment deadlines. My range of worries was quickly about to change.

On August 29, 2003, my world turned upside down. What I thought to be the biggest worries in my life soon became insignificant. I was called in to VGH for further investigation on my abnormal blood results, drawn earlier that day. The recipe to my diagnosis: start with a mini assessment; add a few more blood tests; throw in an Ativan and spike it with a dash of biopsy. My final result was leukemia.

Fortunately for me, the situation seemed hopeful. The physicians were ecstatic to tell me about my promising statistics. Being newly diagnosed and clueless about what this disease entailed, I accepted the statistics as if they were solely based on me. What could be better than hearing a doctor tell you that there is any type of leukemia you would want to have, APL is the one. With such positive attitudes and reassuring numbers, I was sure that I would be out of there in no time to spend a weekend in Whistler before the summer was over. I spent the next 100 days in the hospital fighting for my life.

My family and I had a very hard time battling leukemia. We were fighting all kinds of complications due to the harsh side effects of the chemotherapy. We made such frequent trips to the OR and ICU that we deserved frequent flyer miles! Now, my worries ranged from small things, such as nausea and vomiting, to major things such as recurrent internal bleeding... quite the change from deciding on hair colours!

Things were starting to look pretty hopeless. On many occasions, the medical team gave up and we were told that saving my life was a hopeless task. But we never gave up hope... and God never gave up on me. When times got tough, we got tougher. My physical recovery was harsh and painful, but I believe that the hardest part of the disease is the mental anguish that accompanies it. Having to wake up every morning not knowing if I'm still in remission; staying up late at night having thoughts of whether or not the remission will last. Last but not least, asking that million dollar question: why me? And the worst thing about this question is that it remains unanswered.

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As I look back at my experience, I now believe that I am most fortunate. Of course, I did not always feel this way about being hospitalized. I must have been the angriest, most depressed, and frustrated patient on the ward. Any person of authority was immediately considered an enemy. I trusted very few, especially if their names began with 'doctor'. But then I came to a realization. I realized how fortunate I was to have had cancer. How can I say such a thing, you ask? This is because it is cancer that taught me how to live again. It is cancer that gave me the chance to face death and win. It is cancer that proved to me how amazing my support system really is. Finally, it is cancer that taught me that it takes strength to survive but it takes courage to live.

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