



LEUKEMIA &
LYMPHOMA
SOCIETY®

fighting blood cancers

Meet our Honored Hero NICOLE



- **Birthdate:** 2/23/1977
- **Diagnosed:** 10/2008
- **Diagnosis:** Hodgkin Lymphoma
- **Finished treatment**

A few years ago, I would have said my life was nothing short of perfect. I was 31 years old, enjoying a successful career & eagerly planning a wedding to the love of my life.

On August 26, 2008, life as I had known it was forever changed. My father was suddenly diagnosed with late stage lung cancer that had metastasized to multiple organs including his brain. The many doctors who saw him were hesitant to give a definitive prognosis, but all were very certain the cancer would ultimately take his life. Our family was shocked & devastated by the news. Grief-stricken & frightened, we all embarked on the unfamiliar journey of cancer treatment. First step, obtain a biopsy of the tumor to identify the specific cancer cell type. The surgeon tasked with this procedure made an attempt to take the biopsy from the lung, but was unsuccessful due to the obscure position of the tumor. He assured us however, he had another plan. He explained that he had noticed a severely enlarged lymph node above my dad's left collarbone, indicating it was affected by the disease. It would be a much simpler option to remove the lymph node & utilize that tissue to determine the cancer cell..

The doctor went on to explain the details, but my mind had wandered elsewhere. I immediately put my hand above my own left collarbone where I had been noticing an odd "lump" for several months. Too busy to put too much thought into it, much less visit a doctor to find out what it was, I self-diagnosed it as a strained muscle resulting from the work-outs I was doing to be in my best shape for the wedding. That logical rational was now being replaced with panic. A million thoughts were running through my head. Should I be concerned? Should I tell someone? Am I imagining this?

About four weeks after his initial diagnosis & an intense round of radiation, my dad was ready to begin chemotherapy. I sat with him during his early rounds of treatment & was amazed by his poise & positive attitude. His response to the treatment was remarkable. It was working to keep his cancer maintained. Our prayers were being answered.

Unable to put my mysterious "lump" out of my mind, I went to see my primary care physician who assured me that an enlarged lymph node could result from a number of things. She believed it was likely an indication that I was fighting an infection. She put me on an antibiotic treatment, drew my blood & advised me to follow-up in two weeks. Two weeks later there was no change. Still not overly concerned, but sensitive to my worry, she ordered a CT scan of my neck to "put my mind at ease." Thoroughly convinced it was nothing, I went in for my scan two days later & didn't give it another thought.

When I saw a missed call from my doctor the following morning, I thought for sure she was calling to confirm what we already knew...this was nothing. I had a busy day planned at work & didn't have time to get back to her right away. I returned from a meeting an hour or so later to find I had missed several calls from her on both my cell & work phones. The message she left advised me to call her at her office right away. My heart sank. Hesitating, I reached for my phone & called the doctor's office. Her first words to me were, "I don't want you to panic, but..." I didn't process much of what she said after that, but understood I was to be at an appointment first thing the following morning for a full body scan. I didn't sleep a wink that night. Having just lived through this very scenario with my dad, I couldn't help but imagine the worst. I had a full body CT scan the next morning. A few hours later we received the anticipated call. The doctor suggested we come in to her office later that afternoon. Surrounded by my fiancé & my family for support, I listened as the doctor explained my scans confirmed abnormal

Lymphadenopathy, or abnormally enlarged lymph nodes. She went on to say that unfortunately, the size of the lymph nodes & pattern of lymphadenopathy was highly suggestive of Lymphoma. I would have to undergo further tests, including a biopsy, to confirm the diagnosis. I knew this process all too well. I had the biopsy a few days later & received the results shortly thereafter. My worst fear had been confirmed. I, too, had cancer.

I was officially diagnosed with stage 2 Hodgkin's Lymphoma on October 30, 2008, just two months after my father was diagnosed & five weeks before my wedding. In the midst of unfortunate irony, there was hope. I was diagnosed in the early stages of a type of cancer with a high cure rate. I would be treated by the miracle worker responsible for keeping my father's terminal cancer in check. I would wait until after my wedding to begin chemotherapy (thanks to that

miracle worker's empathetic heart!) Most importantly, my father and I were going to fight cancer as a team, hand-in-hand.

On December 6, 2008, my dad proudly walked me down the aisle to marry Garrett, the man of my dreams. It was the happiest day of my life. It was everything I dreamed it would be & cancer was the furthest thing from my mind. With our planned trip to Maui now out of the question, Garrett & I took a brief honeymoon to Captiva Island, a short drive from our home in South Florida. Four days later I underwent my first chemotherapy treatment.

The side effects I experienced after my first treatment were like nothing I could have imagined. My mouth was full of blisters, every bone & muscle in my body ached, I couldn't eat or drink a thing & my hair was already beginning to come out in clumps. I didn't know how I would endure it over & over again. During the toughest times, all I could think about was the many children that battle this disease & are forced to deal with the side effects of treatment that I, an adult, found so unbearable. It's heartbreaking.

During the early days of my diagnosis & treatment, my family & I turned to LLS for support. For a detailed understanding of my disease & available treatment options, tips for dealing with the side effects I was experiencing & for much needed inspiration, LLS empowered me to take an active role in my fight. Most importantly, much of what I learned from LLS could also be shared with my dad.

I fought my cancer along side my dad for nearly six months. After 8 chemotherapy treatments and 17 radiation therapy treatments, my cancer went into remission. *I was no longer a cancer patient, I was a cancer survivor.* My dad continued to fight his cancer for nearly two years. On May 18, 2010, just days after I passed my 1 year cancer-free milestone, my dad lost his brave battle.

Now, two years in remission, I continue to lean on LLS for support & I look forward to Light The Night every year. It is my night to celebrate with fellow cancer survivors, to support those who continue their battle & to honor my dad & all those who've been taken from us by this relentless disease. Most importantly, Light The Night allows me the opportunity to encourage others to support LLS's dedication to funding blood cancer research, educating patients & caregivers & saving lives.



What is Hodgkin Lymphoma?

"Lymphoma" is a general term for many blood cancers that originate in the lymphatic system. Lymphoma results when a lymphocyte (type of white cell) undergoes a malignant change & multiplies out of control. Eventually, healthy cells are crowded out & malignant lymphocytes amass in the lymph nodes, liver, spleen and/or other sites in the body.

Hodgkin lymphoma has characteristics that distinguish it from other diseases classified as lymphoma, including the presence of the Reed-Sternberg cell, a large, malignant cell found in Hodgkin lymphoma tissues.

- An estimated 628,415 people in the US are living with lymphoma.
- The five-year relative survival rate for Hodgkin lymphoma has more than doubled from 40% in the 1960's to almost 88% now.
- Roughly 74,030 people in the US will be diagnosed with lymphoma this year.
- Incidence rates for Hodgkin lymphoma & NHL tend to be higher in males.
- Lymphoma is the 3rd most common cancer in children 0-19 yrs of age.