



When I was diagnosed with Hodgkin's in February of 2000, I did not know how I was going to get through it. Originally from Alabama, I had come to Sacramento to visit a good friend from college for Christmas and spend some time relaxing and mending a broken heart. I had just spent the previous year in Israel and Australia, planning a wedding that fell through a week before the event. I was devastated, but still had hope that life had more for me than I could imagine. With my friend's invitation to spend the holidays with her and her family, I looked forward to moving on with my life.

I didn't recognize the symptoms. Sure, I was extremely tired and had lost weight, but I just thought it was due to the recent heartbreak in my life. In fact, I was actually happy that I was losing weight and thought the protruding "bone" on my collarbone was a token of my thinness. However, that "bone" turned out to be a swollen lymph node just above my collarbone. And the tiredness and weight loss were also indicative of Hodgkin's Disease. I was still staying with my friend and her family when I got the news that I had cancer. My family was still back in Alabama and didn't exactly come forward to help and support me during that time, but fortunately, my friend's family treated me like a daughter and took care of me during this time. I didn't have health insurance so my friend's family helped raise funds at the church they attended and they were able to raise enough for my initial tests and scans. Three months after my diagnosis I finally was eligible for health insurance through my new job and I began treatment in May 2000. I completed three months of intensive chemotherapy and one month of daily (Monday-Friday) radiation.

While I was going through my treatment, I really didn't have time to think about what was happening to me. Chemo brought so many hardships on my body that when I would go in for my treatment the nurses would have to put me to sleep so I could endure the four to five hour chemo sessions without getting violently ill. My friend's mother (bless her!) had to learn how to give me shots at home because my white blood cell count would be too low for me to have chemo unless I had shots to bolster the count ahead of time. Her house during this time looked like a pharmacy with remedies for all sorts of ailments that chemo brings – just fill in the blank! But during this time I refused to think about the severity of the illness. Instead, I joked and laughed and tried to reassure my friend's family that all was well. Because they were extending their home to me and being so brave by taking care of me, I did not want to bring them down with any sorrow or fears of my own. Instead, I repressed my feelings and carried on as though nothing were wrong.

Two years after my treatment, I began to take control of my life again. The realization that I was still alive and had a future began to set in. It was at that time that I decided to go to law school. Law school was rewarding, but I began feeling depressed for "no reason." Of course, all the feelings I had repressed while I had cancer finally began to surface and I had to deal with them. One of the feelings I had to deal with was my inability to use or control my body the way I was used to. I had been somewhat athletic in high school and college, running cross-country, track and playing tennis, but now I suffered from a side effect of chemo/radiation which was hypothyroidism. Hypothyroidism made me feel sluggish and caused me to gain approximately 60 pounds within a year. I began taking medicine for this disorder, but I still had to combat the weight gain and get to know my body in a new way.

Another feeling I had to deal with was my feeling of being a victim to cancer. Even though cancer did not kill me, I felt dead emotionally. I felt angry and helpless. I felt like whatever strength I might have had before cancer was totally depleted. I was overcome and cancer had won.

But then, one day going through my mail I came upon something from Team in Training. Did I want to run/walk a full/half marathon to benefit the Leukemia and Lymphoma Society? What?! Was it really possible that I could do something for myself while at the same time contribute to an organization that was trying to raise money for the very thing that nearly killed me? I was intrigued. I went to the information meeting in July of 2007. My life has never been the same.

I completed my first half-marathon in October 2007 – smiling all the way. I actually had mono during the half-marathon but I refused to let it stop me. The most miles I had completed at that point was only eight, so I had no idea how I was going to get through it. But that thought brought me back to when I was first diagnosed with cancer and I didn't know how I was going to get through that either. Then I realized something I had known all along but had just somehow forgotten: God gives me strength to do all things. God was with me and helped me get through cancer by bringing my friend's family to me, and God was with me now to help me get through this half-marathon by bringing another sort of family to me – my TNT family. Completing my first half-marathon was one of the proudest and most humbling days of my life. I was proud of myself for accomplishing this difficult task, but I was also humbled at God's grace in my life to show me I was not alone.

My journey of rediscovering myself is still on-going. But this time, I know something I never knew before: From the heartbreak and despair comes strength. I am more than a survivor – I am a fighter! (If you need a really inspirational marathon song, check out Christina Aguilera's song, "Fighter" - my TNT theme song.) I have hope and I have a future, and I know that I can do anything because God gives me the strength. In fact, just within this last year my future has begun to look more positive and promising. I graduated from law school in May 2008, and completed my first full marathon last June! Shortly after the marathon I took and passed the bar exam and am now an attorney. And if that wasn't exciting enough, I recently became engaged while on a surprise trip to Rome, Italy!! I am still getting to know myself "post-cancer" but I know that I am not alone on my path. Thanks to Team in Training, I feel like anything is possible! Go Team! ~ Elizabeth

