Acute Lymphoblastic Leukemia: Whitney's Story

Each day, Whitney Dugan wrote down a personal mantra to help get her through transplant: “I am young, I am strong and I will beat this.”

Whitney Dugan

Andover, New Jersey
Acute Lymphoblastic Leukemia
Transplanted in 2018

Many thanks to the BMT Program at John Theurer Cancer Center, the American Society for Transplantation and Cellular Therapy and Kadmon, A Sanofi Company for helping us share Whitney’s story.

Whitney Dugan’s superpower – a spirit of “attitude is altitude” – developed over her years teaching middle school history and coaching high school basketball. In 2018, when she was first diagnosed with acute lymphoblastic leukemia with the Philadelphia chromosome mutation, Whitney put her head down and ran at her illness the way she would face a sports opponent, full throttle.

“I’m a very competitive person, I don’t like doing anything at less than my full abilities.”

Early on, she adopted routines that fortified her highest hopes. “I had a mantra, I wrote it out every single day: I am young, I
am strong, and I will beat this.”

Whitney intuitively understood the concept of the ‘long game.’ As she describes it, “School and sports are microcosms of life. There’s no instant gratification… You have to fall in love with routine and repetition: Taking the same pills every day; getting enough water; keeping your appointments. You’re not going to cure cancer or get an amazing left hand on the basketball court in one day. You have to wait for the pay off, you have to have faith.”

Whitney was also comforted by the collaborative, inter-dependent mindset of sports, “I had to trust my coaches – my doctors. I couldn’t get better, or win, on my own. I had to lean on, and work with, my teammates.”

Whitney’s teammates included a loving, devoted family. Whitney’s parents, who live near her New Jersey home, are also teachers who supported Whitney continuously through her healing. As she says, “They dropped everything for me. I’ve always loved my family, but the perspective of getting ill has intensified that. I prioritize them now!”

One indication of how close Whitney and her family are, is that all three of her three siblings were acutely disappointed when they didn’t match Whitney to be her donor. (Of her ultimate donor, an anonymous 19-year-old female who she has yet to meet, Whitney says simply, “She’s a special soul.”)
Though they couldn't donate, Whitney's siblings championed her journey to wellness with creativity and gusto. Her older brother, Matt, who lives 1,500 miles away in Colorado, shaved his head during a visit on Whitney's birthday, as a show of solidarity. Her younger brother, Andrew, who lives close by, cooked delicious meals for her once a week. And her older sister, Courtney, brought her twin boys to visit often; they infused Whitney with an "enthusiasm for life!" Courtney also recorded and transcribed a key doctor's appointment so that Whitney could return to the optimistic prognosis, as needed, and take heart.

With her family shoring her up, Whitney tackled cancer with exceptional spunk and personal style. Knowing she'd soon go bald, she cut and collected her rare, ginger-gold hair for a wig made by Compassionate Creations. As Whitney says, "I had a tremendous wig made from my own hair. It was a game changer!" She also wore her own clothes in the hospital, showered daily (necessary to keep dangerous germs at bay!) and brought a portable exercise bike to her in-patient unit.

For Whitney, the power of self-care is foundational, "Putting on that uniform of yourself helps you believe you will be yourself again."

Of course, there were also low moments. Like many patients, Whitney found returning to "normalcy" especially challenging, "As I was reentering life, I felt like a fraud. I looked like me but I didn't feel like me." She views herself as an industrious, bubbly extrovert, but while regaining her strength, she says, "I couldn't be any of those things."
Whitney also grappled with survivor’s guilt, “There were people I went through treatment with who didn’t make it.” Ultimately, Whitney sought help via therapy, which she found transformational.

These days, she focuses on the gifts of her illness and recovery, “I believe I’m a better daughter, sister, coach and friend after transplant… I am more empathic. I look for the wonder…” And, after all she’s been through, perhaps because of what she’s been through, Whitney’s mantra rings perfectly true: She’s young, she’s strong, and she beat this.

The Blood and Marrow Stem Cell Transplantation Program at John Theurer Cancer Center (JTCC), part of Hackensack University Medical Center, is one of the largest in the United States, with more than 400 transplants performed each year, and the second transplant facility to be FACT accredited. Our team was also the first in the United States to be recognized by the Joint Commission to receive Disease-Specific Care Certification for stem cell transplantation. JTCC was the first site certified to provide CAR T-cell therapy in New Jersey. We are active participants in many important studies of novel medicines and transplant techniques. Our transplant team is committed to delivering the most advanced care and cutting-edge treatment to improve our patients’ outcomes. We also offer a wide-range of resources to support our patients’ physical and emotional well-being before, during and after transplantation.

The American Society for Transplantation and Cellular Therapy (ASTCT), formerly known as the American Society for Blood and Marrow Transplantation, is a professional society of more than 2,200 healthcare professionals and scientists from over 45 countries who are dedicated to improving the application and success of blood and marrow transplantation and related cellular therapies. ASTCT strives to be the leading organization promoting research, education, and clinical practice to deliver the best, comprehensive patient care.