

Teen refuses to let cancer slow her down

Continued from pg. 1

were taken again of both knees. This time the X-ray showed there was a mass on her knee, something that had been missed in the first X-ray.

Moriah was immediately sent to The Hospital for Sick Children in Toronto and following an MRI was sent home reassured by doctors they didn't believe her situation was critical.

But the story had changed by the next morning.

The family got an 8 a.m. wake-up call from the head of oncology at Sick Kids who told them they believed the mass was a cancerous tumor, and Moriah needed to come in that week for an MRI, CT scan and bone scan.

The following week the family received the devastating diagnosis. They were told the cancer was Stage 4, and that they had also found spots in Moriah's lungs, her pelvis and thigh.

"They told us they were more than 80 per cent sure that this was cancer in her lungs," said Karen. "We were absolutely shocked because Moriah had just made the Georgetown Impact rep volleyball team the week before. How could this be in her lungs?"

Fortunately, a follow-up biopsy done on the lung revealed the spots were not cancerous and the other lesions were deemed not to be cancer also.

Moriah said she was "really in shock" when she got the cancer diagnosis.

"After a year of that pain, not knowing at all, and just thinking we could have stopped this way before now.



Moriah Kolenda recuperating at home.
Photo by Ted Brown

"It was the hardest in the beginning," said Moriah, who admits she was a little angry initially.

The plan was three months of chemotherapy followed by surgery, starting last October, to shrink the tumour, but unfortunately it actually got bigger.

When doctors first discussed surgery they told her limb salvage surgery—where the bone and muscle affected by the osteosarcoma are removed, leaving a gap in the bone that is filled by either a bone graft (usually from the bone bank) or more often a special metal prosthesis—would not be an option as the main artery ran right through the tumour. They told her she was going to have amputation of the leg just above the knee.

Moriah did not want the amputation and told them she really wanted the limb salvage surgery. The doctor reassessed, and finally agreed to do the nine-hour limb salvage surgery, optimistic it would be successful.

Moriah had to provide muscle from her back and an artery from her other leg to be used in the affected leg.

Karen said there were 10 doctors working on her daughter throughout the surgery that ended up lasting 21 hours.

She and her husband David were frantic while they waited for word on Moriah, and did not hear how things were going until several hours in.

Doctors came out with bad news.

Moriah's parents were told surgeons had discovered Moriah had a rare clotting problem no one could have known about. They put her on blood thinners, but could not get the clotting to stop.

Karen said when doctors came out again they told them Moriah was "gravely ill" and it was now about saving her life. They said they couldn't continue with the limb salvage surgery, and had to amputate her leg just above the knee.

"We had to make that decision without her knowing," which was very difficult because they knew how much Moriah wanted to save her leg.

Moriah, with her breathing laboured, was put in the intensive care unit (ICU) immediately after surgery. She was on pain medication, had a breathing tube down her throat and could only communicate with her parents by scribbling words on paper. Roughly seven hours

following surgery she asked why she hadn't heard how it went.

Her parents had to tell her doctors had to amputate her leg and thought she would be very upset.

"She scratched out on the paper, 'tell them thank you for trying so hard,'" Karen said. "There wasn't a dry eye in the ICU.

"We knew then that she was going to be okay, with an attitude like that," Karen said.

Moriah started on a new course of chemotherapy in February, this one with new powerful drugs added to the mix, said Karen. She's hospitalized during the chemo treatments.

Karen said they have recently removed the new drugs from the treatment because of the potency of the side effects and questions about their efficacy on Moriah's cancer.

Sometimes the teen admits she gets down about what's happened to her.

"I try to tell myself there are so many people who have it worse. I try to see the positive. If you think about the negative stuff you're going to make yourself sad.

I try to get out with friends a lot."

Karen said in most cases like Moriah's where someone has had a leg amputation, they would not get a prosthetic until they had finished chemotherapy treatment—about a year after the surgery.

But Moriah was not hearing any of that. About three weeks after surgery, during a physiotherapy session, she asked if she could just try an artificial leg.

The two prosthetists immediately said no, but Moriah's physiotherapist suggested why not piece together something for her to try.

The prosthetists agreed and rummaged through their drawers fashioning Moriah a leg out of some spare parts.

Karen said the physiotherapist and prosthetists could not believe it when she put the leg on and could immediately walk between the parallel bars.

"From that day on she just hasn't stopped. She just keeps pushing," said Karen.



Moriah Kolenda at a cancer fundraising in her honour last fall.
File photo

She received a new high activity leg in May funded through the War Amps CHAMP program, and set the goal to be walking hands-free with it by July because she wanted to go to a concert. She achieved that goal in May.

Walking with the artificial leg has taken some getting used to, and she has regular physiotherapy sessions to learn how to use it.

She does regular exercises to build up her leg muscles and her core.

At home she sets up cups on the floor and maneuvers around them—the goal is to get back to her passion—volleyball.

The family has a volleyball net set up in the backyard, for both Moriah and her brother Josh, also an avid volleyball player. He's 18-months older than Moriah and has tricuspid artesia—a heart condition—but is doing amazingly well. Moriah has been able to pass the ball back and forth to Josh since her treatment began, but is looking forward to when she can get back to playing like she did.

She is also hoping to learn to run with the prosthesis soon.

Moriah has recently learned she will soon be getting an athletic leg, one that will allow her to snowboard, rock climb, ice skate and rollerblade, and be better for playing volleyball.

She hopes to be done with her chemotherapy by early September and is looking forward to going back to Christ the King, where she is in Grade 11, and is eager to try out "at least for the school (volleyball) team."

"I try to tell myself there are so many people who have it worse."
—Moriah Kolenda

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