

Student turns cancer diagnosis into a cause

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By Eva McKendrick Staff Writer

In the summer of 2006, Casey Patton finished her first triathlon. Weeks later, in September, the 17-year-old was diagnosed with cancer.

Patton said she was having vision trouble, which was strange because the eye exam she had taken a few months earlier said she had perfect vision. So she went to doctor after doctor, trying to figure out the problem.

"'Brain tumor' had not crossed our minds once," said the Downers Grove South High School senior.

Patton, a Woodridge resident, was diagnosed with optic glioma, a low-grade tumor inside her optic nerve. In October 2006, she underwent brain surgery at Children's Memorial Hospital in Chicago.

A month later, on Patton's 17th birthday, she received a not-so-great birthday present - her first round of chemotherapy. Her doctors recommend she stay on the chemo through June.

Since then, a typical week for Patton has consisted of going to school Monday through Wednesday, undergoing seven hours of chemo on Thursday, sleeping and feeling nauseated through Saturday and beginning to feel better on Sunday before returning to school. Her regimen consists of four weeks on chemotherapy and then two weeks off.

Patton said her MRIs have shown that the tumor decreased in size by 25 percent just after the treatment began but since then has stayed the same size. Because the tumor isn't growing, she said her doctors think the tumor may now be dead tissue and that, while it still affects her vision, she could be out of the woods.

"If the tumor remains stable, we consider that a success," said Patton's doctor, Jason Fangusaro, an attending professor of pediatrics at Children's Memorial Hospital. He said there is a chance the tumor could start growing again after chemotherapy is complete.

"We live one day at a time," said Patton's mother, Diane, who knows her daughter could relapse at any time.

But Patton is pushing on, applying to colleges, including Northwestern University in Evanston and the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

For Patton, going from triathlons and varsity volleyball to resting most of the week was a tough transition that began taking its toll on her mental health.

"I was so sick and tired of being depressed all the time," she said. "There were suddenly a large number of things I couldn't do. My new life was now sitting down and watching the time go by."

To give herself something to do, last May she set a goal of raising \$3,500 for Children's Memorial by selling T-shirts. As of Oct. 3, her organization, Be the Cure, had raised nearly \$27,000 and sold 1,300 T-shirts.

"It snowballed into something way bigger," she said.

The volleyball teams at both Downers Grove North and Downers Grove South high schools decided to wear the Be the Cure T-shirts for their annual crosstown game. The Illinois Wesleyan University volleyball team also wore the shirts at a recent game, and Patton says North Central College in Naperville plans to do the same in a few weeks. Northside College Preparatory High School in Chicago is even setting up a 24-hour volleyball marathon inspired by Patton's research fund.

"Casey's really worked hard to raise this money, especially while she's going through kind of a hard time herself," Fangusaro said.

Downers Grove South helped Patton's cause at the end of September, when proceeds from homecoming went to Be the Cure. At the homecoming pep rally, Patton was presented with a \$6,000 check.

The T-shirts, which sell for \$12, are provided by a donor, so 100 percent of the proceeds go toward pediatric cancer research at Children's Memorial. Patton wants to do everything in her power to make the chemotherapy process easier for other children with cancer.

"No child should have to live like this," she said. "It makes you sick. It makes you unhappy."

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