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Photos by; Kate Flock

Johanna , 8, of West Roxbury, was diagnosed last year with Burkett Lymphoma and given less than 2 weeks to live. She has since recovered and is back to practicing Tae Kwon Do at **Cho's Olympic Tae Kwon Do** in Dedham.



Cancer couldn't get Hanna down

By David Ertischek

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From meeting 8-year-old Hanna, you wouldn't think that she spent all last summer going through chemotherapy treatments at Children's Hospital. She is a ball of energy floating around her home like one of the carefree butterflies she likes to draw.

It was only last Mother's Day when Hanna became ill, vomiting every day for a week. At first her parents, Michael and Carol, of West Roxbury, thought their daughter had the stomach virus going around at St. Joseph's Elementary School in Needham. After all, the school had actually closed due to the bug.

Hanna was taken to her pediatrician, but by the following Friday, she was dry heaving every 20 minutes and unable to keep anything down. Her parents felt like her body had doubled in size.

Said Michael, "We didn't know it. But the tumors were doubling [in] size."

Her parents took her to Children's Hospital and they quickly ran an array of medical tests, including a colonoscopy, which showed Hanna had a cancerous tumor. At that point, her breathing was labored.

Doctors quickly established that Hanna had Burkitt lymphoma; a cancer of the lymphatic system which, if not treated, would have most likely killed Hanna in seven to 10 days.

"It was horrid," said Carol. "It's hard to put into words. It was horrifying. How could this be? She really was a healthy kid. No earaches, no headaches, she was never sick, she never had the flu."

Dr. Barbara Degar, a pediatric oncologist, Hanna's attending doctor, said there was a large tumor in Hanna's abdomen, one on her pelvis, fluid in her chest, as well as several other sites of disease with evidence of tumor spread.

Chemotherapy treatment started the next day. Like Burkitt's tumors, the chemotherapy treatment needs to be just as aggressive. Burkitt's comes on quickly and had most likely developed in Hanna's body within three months leading up to her overt symptoms. A week before she got sick, Hanna was playing Parkway Little League T-ball.

Staying at Children's Hospital, Hanna was under sedation and getting heavy doses of chemo the first couple of days. Doctors told Michael & Carol that if they didn't see a 20 percent decrease of the tumors in the first week, they would have to start the process from the beginning. By the end of the week, 100 percent of the tumors had dissolved. There was so much fluid being given that her IV bag was often replaced every 15 minutes.

Her parents took turns staying with her. Throughout the summer, Hanna endured rounds of chemo with her parents by her side.

Even with having tubes down her throat, a constant IV bag with a pole or a tube directly inserted into her chest, the little sparkplug still kept an upbeat attitude.

Ask her about Children's Hospital, and what does she say?

"They had a playroom, a computer room, clowns, pizza, ice cream, salad and burritos..."

Hanna's first trip out of 6 North, the floor that she stayed on, was to the cafeteria. And while her father would probably like to forget the trip, Hanna laughs at it.

"So I said to Dada 'I think I'm going to barf.' So I went over to the food bowls..." Hanna joked that vomit was coming out of her ears and eyes.

Hanna also named her disease the "grancer bug" because on X-rays she thought the cancer looked like groups of grapes: Grapes + cancer = grancer.

Although Hanna seems to be the eternal optimist, even at the age of 8, she knows what cancer means. Her maternal grandfather had passed away from pancreatic cancer two years earlier.

"We had to tell her it was cancer. She started crying," said Michael. "She knew she could die."

As chemo treatments went on, little Hanna started losing strips of her hair.

"I wanted to take her mind off being bald," said Michael, so the duo went to Sebastian's Barber Shop in Roslindale and got matching shaved heads. The shop did not charge for the haircuts.

Hanna's hair has since grown back and it's lighter and curlier than the dark brown straight hair she used to have. It is common for cancer patients to have changes in their hair color.

"Mom's a little jealous of my blond streaks," joked Hanna.

And while Hanna was in the hospital, her classmates last spring were still in session. One day while cleaning out Hanna's desk, her teacher, Helen McLaughlin, found a prayer that Hanna had written, which was to be read to the entire school during Morning Prayer.

The Friday that Hanna went into the hospital, she was supposed to read her prayer. Hanna was working on the prayer with her mom the day before.

Please take care of the children that are very, very sick in the hospital. I pray for them every day. Amen

Carol asked her daughter why she wanted to write something about children in a hospital when Hanna had never been in a hospital — but two days later there she was at Children's Hospital.

McLaughlin, as well as her second-grade teacher, Betsy Harrigan, along with many other friends, family and school officials, came to visit Hanna while she was in the hospital. McLaughlin even let go of the classrooms butterflies in the Children's Hospital outside garden with Hanna.

While Hanna had offered a foretelling prayer for herself as her parents, family and friends prayed, she also had a group of nuns praying for her health. Earlier in the year, before Hanna became ill, she had visited Sister Aurora Larkin (a relative of the family) of the Grey Nuns at their motherhouse in Quebec. Michael said the family sat down with the nuns and were about to eat until Hanna reminded everyone they needed to say grace. So Hanna led the nuns and her family in grace.

As nuns, teachers and more people prayed for Hanna, she did have times of getting out of the hospital to go home between rounds of chemo treatment. There was one 16-hour period that Michael felt exemplified his daughter's strength.

Michael recalled one night with his daughter in the hospital as she cried and fought to go to the bathroom as her hair fell out in his hands. The next day she went to her cousin's birthday party and was jumping in a bouncy ride.

"She's a very vivacious, outgoing girl," said Dr. Degar. "Very cute, very pretty and very upbeat."

Children's Hospital sees just a few kids a year who are diagnosed with Burkitt's. The survival rate, if caught at the time when it was detected for Hanna, is from 80 to 90 percent. About 300 kids a year are diagnosed with Burkitt's a year in the U.S.

Incredibly, Hanna recovered quite well and was back in school for the second grade on the first day of school back in September.

Hanna has since signed up for soccer, is going to take tennis lessons and even got her green belt in tae kwon do.

“It’s changed my life,” said Michael. “Nothing bothers me anymore. If I don’t finish this or finish that — I come home and get to spend time with my daughter.”

Michael’s family company, Brait Builders Corporation, has also always held a golf tournament, and from now on the funds raised will go to Children’s Hospital. For information about the tournament, visit www.braitbuildersopen.com.

Back at home, their new kitten, Baxter, chases Hanna around the house as she proudly displays her many drawings and makes plans for her next art project.

Her parents smile even prouder at their daughter than they did a year ago.

“She hates to miss out on anything,” said Carol.