

Cancer calls while she's pregnant

Written by Elizabeth Barrett

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Jenna Clark finds journaling about her journey therapeutic on Internet site.

“Do I start at the very beginning, when we found out we were expecting? Or move forward to the weeks I spent on the couch, too sick from puking to even move? From our first stay in the hospital for dehydration caused by all of the sickness? For the placenta issue we had? For the polyp that was removed? The puking...still?”

Oh wait...then there was finding out that I have cancer. Maybe we will start with that. The ‘C’ word seems to take precedent these days.”

Jenna Clark, a 2002 Gothenburg High School graduate, wrote this entry through the Internet site CaringBridge.org on Sept. 29, 2009.

Twenty-eight days before, the 25-year-old mother—who was six months pregnant with her second son—was told she had papillary thyroid cancer.

“I just nodded my head and wiped away tears that found their way down my cheeks as the doctor visited with us (Jenna and husband Pat Clark, a 2000 GHS graduate) about what was to come. All I really took away from that day was: cancer, surgery, treatment and that the prognosis was good because I am young.

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I just remember thinking, 'yeah, but I am pregnant.' What about my baby?

Jenna initially visited the doctor because of a constant popping in her ear. It was then the doctor found a lump that tested malignant.

Six days after the diagnosis, doctors removed her thyroid gland and discovered that the cancer had spread to Jenna's lymph nodes.

With the removal of her thyroid, Jenna started taking a thyroid hormone which—coupled with pregnancy fatigue—left her with little energy.

Because of her pregnancy, cancer treatment was postponed.

One of the biggest lessons she learned during this time was to accept help with household chores and caring for the couple's active 3-year-old son Grady.

"It has been an amazing support to have meals, babysitters for Grady...our lawn was mowed, friends helped me get the news out, my coworkers took care of my responsibilities and today, I let someone help me clean my house. Now that, I believe, shows progress."

Jenna said the outpouring of support from the community was amazing. Patrick's colleagues at Columbus High School where he teaches and coaches helped cover his classes when he needed to attend appointments with her.

Her coworkers, at a domestic violence and assault center where she was a child advocate, were also great supporters.

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“One of the things that touched Patrick and I is that help not only came from the town we live in but the place we still call ‘home’ (Gothenburg),” she said.

Money was also raised to help defray medical expenses.

In fact Jenna writes:

“Then I open up the second card from a wonderful family and inside was a check made out with the instructions to use it for whatever we need most...I just know that when we trust Him, he blesses us in many different ways.

I know that this journey will continue to be difficult at times, but it is important to note all of the times like today when we can see God using other people to reach out to us and lift us up.”

Gavin Clark was born Oct. 1, 2009.

“I needed to see him...needed to focus on him and not the ‘bad stuff’ in me...His spine looked perfect. His heart looked perfect. To me, he looked perfect.”

Four days after she delivered Gavin, Jenna and Patrick drove to Norfolk to meet the doctor who would administer a radio-iodine treatment to fight the cancer.

“It’s the only effective treatment for papillary and follicular thyroid cancers once they have spread beyond the thyroid gland.” she explained. “RAI can kill cancer cells anywhere in the body, wherever they might be.”

The downside to the treatment was having to quarantine herself from Grady and Gavin for a week. She also couldn’t hold Gavin for two weeks.

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"I didn't leave Grady until he was about 6 months old and I hate the thought of leaving when this baby is still so tiny but it is just what is going to have to happen. They need a healthy mom and I want to be done with all of this."

Jenna was taken off all the medications she was taking to prepare her for the treatment for a week.

"I felt horrible," she said.

Six weeks later, she underwent the treatment.

"We are just going to pray that the first round will get all of the cancer cells and hope for the best! It was nice of the doctor to bring it up today..I would hate to have been blindsided with that news at a later time."

At this time, the Clarks hope only one treatment is needed. Blood test results the end of April will show the next step.

Last week, Jenna said she's gaining her energy back and feeling close to normal.

"But I don't think I will ever be the same," she said. "I am much more thankful for the simple things in life such as spending time with family and friends and waking up feeling rested."

Jenna said Grady summed it up best the day before she had a full-body scan before the radio-iodine treatment.

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“As we were dangling our feet in a pool at our hotel, he rested his head on my shoulder and said, ‘Is this the life mom?’ ”

Perhaps the biggest lesson Jenna said she and Patrick have learned is how God uses their experiences to touch the lives of others.

“It has been humbling to hear how our experience has affected our family, friends and complete strangers—all of which leaves me a bit speechless.”

A cross-country runner in high school, Jenna said she never had any idea at the time that running and coach Steve Reeves would teach her so many lessons plus give her the motivation and determination to help illustrate what the process has been for her.

While reflecting on her journey, Jenna has often wondered what God was telling her.

In a Jan. 31 entry, she shares what she was thinking. Here are a some excerpts:

Why God, did I have to be diagnosed with cancer while pregnant?

“Because Jenna, I want you to really learn to trust in me. I want to perform extra miracles for you to see. Just trust in Me. I will show you.”

Why God, are there so many hard days during this journey? Why does it hurt so much?

“Because Jenna, I want you to come to me when you are hurting. I will wipe away your tears and I will bring others into this journey to do the same. Let them help you.”

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Why God, did I have to be diagnosed with cancer?

"Because dear, just because....."

Often that is all a parent has to say...I can't argue with that. It doesn't mean I like it, but I'm not going to argue. He knows best, right?!

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