

Nicole McKinnon's speech at the Relay for Life – unedited

Feeling tired, nauseous and my whole body becoming itchy, was just the beginning of a number of doctor visits for me. In April of 2008, I was two months along in my pregnancy when my body started to undergo some strange, and to me unusual things. For the next seven months, I was reassured by my doctors all my problems were pregnancy related.

On November 19th of 2008 I was introduced to my angel, Brayden

Only 6lbs and 8ozs, this little bundle of joy had no idea, he was about to be my strength, my courage, and my main reason to fight the battle of my life.

In February of 2009, I was still feeling the symptoms to those I had been feeling in my pregnancy, only now I was not pregnant. I saw changes in my skin and I became very weak. Very concerned I went back to the doctor.

Never in a million years expected the news I was about to hear.

My dad was standing next to my bed when the doctor entered the room. The doctor looked at me, and noticed a lump on the side of my neck and before running any tests, he said with confidence that, the lump was cancer.

Falling to his knees, I watched my father's entire world crash in front of my eyes.

Daddy's little girl had cancer

My Mother just returning from work in Saskatchewan was not welcomed home with a smile, but with very unwelcoming news. She would now step in as a mother to my son while I was in the hospital. Having to take care of a newborn, waking up every few hours for feeding, to be changed, rocked, cuddled or comforted, my mom and dad filled the void of a missing mother in a newborn's life.

On February 24th of 2009, at the age of 21, with a three month old son, I was diagnosed with Hodgkin's Lymphoma. I had cancer in my neck, my chest and in my spleen.

I was immediately air ambulanced to St. Johns where I spent three months, undergoing 6 rounds of chemotherapy, then I was sent back home to Corner Brook to do an additional 12.

I finished my treatment in July and in September, my mother and I flew to Halifax to get confirmation that I was in remission.

I just wasn't convinced.

I think the toughest part for me was feeling somehow I was to blame, like God was punishing me for something I had done. At a young age, we never believe something like this could happen to us.

I spent the next four months soaking up every waking minute with my son. We celebrated his first birthday, spent the holiday season with our family and friends and in January of 2010, right after my 22nd birthday, my worst fear was becoming a reality all over again.

I was in for the fight of my life

We packed our things, travelled back to St John's and that's where I began the next chapter of my life. We lived in St John's for nearly six months, and in that time I had to undergo another 4 rounds of chemotherapy and finally a stem cell transplant to which I was lucky enough to be my own donor. The transplant process took 2 full months. In that time I had my stem cells removed, had two full days of high dose chemotherapy and finally on May 17th of 2010 my stem cells were re-infused. After a long recovery, my mother, Brayden and I then flew to Halifax once again to get confirmation that I was in remission.

This time I was convinced.

When I was first diagnosed with cancer, chemotherapy took all of my hair and I was left with scars all over my body.

At first I isolated myself from others in fear that someone would stare, but along the way my family constantly reminded me of how beautiful I was.

Brayden's father told me every day that with or without hair I was beautiful, and that the scars on my body were beauty marks that showed the world just how hard I fought.

I remember when I was fighting my battle how angry I was at times. It felt like I was standing on the sidelines, watching as my life went on without me. As much as it hurt battling the cancer, it hurt much more when I couldn't do the everyday things I wanted to do, like bring Brayden to the park, take him out trick or treating on his first Halloween, or even give him a bath before bedtime. I missed out on going to school, trips to the cabin with my friends and my sister in laws entire pregnancy.

But I'm not standing on the sidelines anymore.

I have returned back to school, I am honored to be the God mother of my brother and sister in laws little girl and most importantly I'm back to being a Mom.

My illness and recovery blessed me with the understanding that life is to be savored each and every day; that slowing down, not sweating the small stuff, finding time to laugh, and ultimately seeing the good in all things – benefits not only our own lives, but the lives of those we know and love.

I also believe there comes a point in everyone's life when our world becomes unbearable and in this moment, we are given the opportunity to sink, to swim or to soar

I am very grateful to be standing here speaking to you today, because I know every person in this room has made the conscious decision to soar, to soar beyond the cancer, not letting it defeat us but letting it define us, define us as strong beautiful people, define us as fighters..And as survivors!

It's been one year and 18 days since my transplant and for nearly two years, my family put their lives on hold and fought this battle with me every step of the way.

I won't let a day go by without telling them I love them and would like to take this opportunity to thank them and everyone else that has supported, encouraged, prayed, and believed in me.

It is with all my heart that I say a big thank you to my mom and dad, who stood by me, supported me, and most importantly took on the most important role, taking care of Brayden

To my Uncle Vern who talked me through my treatments, organized fundraisers and was a big part of my support system

To my aunt Maggie who is a survivor for 17 years and always told me I'd be a survivor like her one day too.

To my brother Darren who was always more than a brother, he is my best friend, who spent many sleepless nights in the hospital just to watch me sleep. Who was always trying to find ways to cheer me up.

To my sister -in- law Christine and my cousin Joanne for holding fundraisers to financially support me and my family so that I could have my loved ones by my side.

To Scott, who never gave up on us, who showed me unconditional love when I needed it most and for always promising me that everything was going to be alright.

To all my extended family and friends who kept me in their thoughts and prayers.

And most importantly to my little angel, although too young right now to understand, he is my strength, my courage and the main reason I am here in front of you today.

It is because of my all family and friends, these great support systems and organizations like the Canadian Cancer Society that I was able to get through this battle.

As we reflect on our journeys, where we have been, how far we have come and where we are today, I leave you with this quote:

"Our lives are not determined by what happens to us but by how we react to what happens, not by what life brings to us, but by the attitude we bring to life. A positive attitude causes a chain reaction of positive thoughts, events, and outcomes. It is a catalyst, a spark that creates extraordinary results."