

Jace's Team

Here I was, 16 years old and playing football at West Hall High School, and I knew that I had a great chance of playing at the collegiate level. I'd always wanted to play college football. That had been my life-long dream, to be part of a college team. I was already being recruited heavily by The Citadel, Gardner-Webb, and other colleges. I was planning on finishing my high school career and attending one of those colleges.

Then, my junior year of high school, at summer camp, I started feeling strange and very tired. I took pride in my conditioning and I knew that I had entered training camp in good physical condition. I experienced a lot of bruising in my arms and legs but didn't think too much about it. I mean, after all, it is a physical game. I just knew something else had to be going on because I had never felt that fatigued and just drained physically.

The season came and I continued to play with the best of my limited ability. Our team started 4-0 and we were playing Flowery Branch High School, our rivals, and I had a great game, my best so far that season. After the game, in my locker room, I started to think that I was coming out of this "funk" that I had been in for the last couple of months. Just then, my coach came to me and said that he wanted to talk to me in his office. I thought it was going to be a good meeting between us, discussing my performance with the team that night. It was far from what I could have ever imagined in my life.

Oddly, my mom was in the office and I could immediately feel tension in the room and a dark cloud seemed to settle upon us. I didn't know what to expect, and then, finally, after moments of silence, my coach told me that I had been diagnosed with Chronic Myelogenous Leukemia (CML). I just started crying my eyes out and thought "Why me? Why now, after everything that I have worked for? I am a "good "guy! Why do I have to go through this?" I remember that night as if it was yesterday. It is a night I will remember forever. I'd had the best game of my life to date, followed by the absolute worst news of my life.

I recognized that as tough as I was, I was going to need help. So, that night, I remember praying to God saying " God I don't know why you put this in my life, but please help me make the best out of it and to have faith throughout this whole thing."

I started taking a relatively new drug called Gleevec and it began working, holding my leukemia at bay. Our team finished 9-2 and earned a playoff experience. Even though I wasn't 100%, I still contributed my best to the team. My goal was just to make it through my senior year with Gleevec and then have a Bone Marrow Transplant, the only known cure for leukemia.

My senior year started, and the recruiting became more involved in my life. I took recruiting trips to various colleges and had teams come to see me. After considering all the opportunities, I decided to commit to play football at The Citadel in Charleston, South Carolina. Our first game was going to be against the Auburn Tigers, and I just pictured myself running out onto the field in front

of 90,000 screaming fans. I never got to experience completion of that picture because the Gleevec had stopped responding. I had to be scheduled for the Bone Marrow Transplant right after graduation.

Two months after graduation, I was at Emory University Hospital in Atlanta. Now 18, I didn't know what to expect. I had that football mentality going into it, thinking, "I am going to beat this!" I had my transplant on August 5, 2004 from an unrelated donor.

Bone Marrow Donor acceptability is judged by testing DNA for specific matching markers. A 10 out of 10 match is preferred. I had countless blood/donor drives at my school and within the community looking for a match, but no one matched. Even my twin sister wasn't a match. Ultimately, an unrelated donor was found that was a 7 out of 10 match for me. The hospital team deemed that sufficient.

Then, as if I wasn't dealing with enough discomfort, my appendix ruptured the day following the transplant. Due to my weakened state and the poor quality and reliability of my blood supply, surgery was out of the question. Honestly, I don't think the doctors had much hope. It was going to be difficult enough to shepherd me through the transplant recovery but a near impossibility to do that while trying to manage the pain and poison created by the appendicitis. I was in excruciating pain and it took significant pain medications and antibiotics to manage the situation.

Experiencing the chemotherapy, the transplant, the appendicitis, the pain medications and being in the hospital was a very difficult time for my family and me. If it hadn't been for my mother and the rest of my family, I know I would not have gotten through it. They never gave up hope. They were such a great team of support for me. They are the biggest reason I am here today, and God of course!

The first year after transplant was very hard. In case any complications or emergency situations were to arise, I had to live near the hospital, so I lived with my Aunt Jodi, who lived closer to the hospital. There, I realized how important the family team really is! From my mother, to my sisters, aunts, uncles and cousins, all contributed to my recovery, and for this I am very thankful. I had a great team of friends who prayed and looked out for me as well.

Another player on my football team was Brent Durden. He'd been my best friend prior to my transplant and showed how great a friend he was after my transplant. He became a huge part of my recovery team. My body needed platelets that my system wasn't making and Brent was found to be a match. He quickly agreed to donate his platelets during this time to keep my body healthier than it would have been and, as a result of his generosity, 4 months following my transplant, my counts recovered to a point where the doctors felt they could perform the appendectomy. They did and I've had no further problems from that.

The following summer I contracted pneumonia and an infection that

kept me in and out of the hospital and intensive care most of the summer. As before, my family, my friends and my faith got me through. Without them, I don't know where, I'd be.

After going to countless doctor visits in the Winship Cancer Infusion Center during this time, I started seeing a young guy around my age, and just thought "I know exactly how he feels. " It wasn't until a few more times that I would see him and get to meet him. His name was Wes Smith and, from the first time I met him, he delivered the biggest impact on my life that anyone could ever give me at the time. During our conversations and visits with each other at the hospital we would talk about our conditions and regular "guy" stuff. It was good to talk to someone my age that knew how I felt, because up to this point, I hadn't had that opportunity. After a while, I was fortunate enough to visit Wes at his home and we had a great visit. He took me for a ride in his car, a "souped up" Honda S2000, which was, by far, the best car I had ever been in. It just felt good to fellowship with someone that could relate to my individual circumstances. He assured me he was on my team of supporters. Even though I only knew him for a limited amount of time, he left a priceless impact on my life. For the last few years I have worn 2 bracelets on my wrists, one, a gray bracelet of WES, the foundation for leukemia research started by his parents, and the other is an orange leukemia bracelet. I will forever wear these bracelets, as daily reminders of how fortunate I am, and the people who have impacted my life. It has recently been 4 years since my transplant and I can say that I am doing very well and I am as healthy as I have been in a long time. I am currently pursuing a medical degree; my ultimate goal is to be a nurse practitioner. The doctors, nurses and the entire transplant team at Emory were so good to me. They inspired me to want to go into the medical field. Hopefully, with my experience and knowledge I can make an impact on people like my teams and Wes did on me. I am a survivor due to their efforts and by God's will. I hope, together, we can find a day when everyone survives.