



Interview Transcript: Nicole

Nicole started college last fall. She has two sisters.

Type of Cancer: NonHodgkin Lymphoma

Age at Diagnosis: 16

Year of Diagnosis: 2006

Treatment: Chemotherapy and radiation over a 4 month period

Date of Interview: March 2010

When I was losing my hair, people would say, “it’s only your hair, you know; it’s going to grow back.” Until people have gone through that, they can’t really say what it’s like because they don’t know until it happens to them.

My name is Nicole Kaiser. I am 20 years old and I was diagnosed with nonHodgkin’s disease when I was 16 years old. I was diagnosed in August shortly after my 16th birthday and I had chemo for three months and then I had 14 straight days of radiation and everything was finished before Christmas, so it was a very short time for a treatment, but it was a very aggressive treatment.

The doctor said that if you’re going to have cancer, this is the one to have. Because it’s the most curable, and I guess that’s supposed to make you feel better. But cancer is cancer and it takes its toll on anyone.

Trying to be normal

For radiation, they mark you with the same needles they use for tattoos and so I needed to be marked all around my chest. So the nurse did one and it hurt so bad and I wouldn’t let her do any more because it was really painful. So instead they used permanent marker which was fine, but, you know, I was in school or I had a dance coming up at school and I was going to go to it. I hadn’t seen my friends and I wanted to go. So I remember trying to scrub off this permanent marker so that you wouldn’t see it with the dress that I was wearing. So you’re in radiation one day, the next you’re going to the school dance. It’s hard to make the transition and still feel like you’re a normal teenager.

Being so sick

The hardest part was feeling sick all the time and being weak and tired, and being hooked up to a machine all the time and having to walk with it. And just the thought of that going into my body, it makes you literally sick to your stomach. When I would have my port flushed, which is what the chemo would go into my body from, the smell of them cleaning it or the smell of getting a needle — that alcoholic swab or whatever it was — would make me sick because it just brings back the memories of having chemo put into your body. I kind of just put up with it

and I put up with feeling sick all the time. I thought it would never... I didn't think it would get better. I thought I would always think about the hospital and get sick to my stomach, but eventually it went away.

Losing my hair

I was a 16yearold teenager in high school and no teenage girl wants to lose her hair. It was a very traumatic thing to go through. I think it took about a month for it to completely go and then I wore bandanas all the time; I hardly ever let someone see me without anything on my head, and I had a wig that I wore. So it helps to know that you can go out and still not look like a cancer patient.

Advocating for myself

I have three scars. This one is from a port, which also is linked to this one. This one is from the biopsy that I had done. These two don't bother me at all. It's uh... I have one right here from my port. It should have been located under my breast but because the cancer was in my chest area, they couldn't get past it to put it where it was supposed to go. So they put it right there. I regret not being more involved in decisions like that. I know it was during surgery, they didn't expect to find the cancer there and not get past it. But there were other options. Like you could have had a port in your arm where they didn't have to do any surgery. So I feel like I would have definitely made a different decision if I would have known that there was going to be a scar for the rest of my life in the middle of my chest.

Try to be open

One thing I regret is that I wasn't open to meeting new people in the hospital who were going through cancer as well. I preferred to just be in my room and just deal with it that way rather than going to events and getting together with some of the kids that were there. I would recommend that anyone in the hospital going through that, get out there if there are things going on in the hospital, even if it's crafts or watching a movie with a bunch of other kids. Even if you don't feel up to it, because they feel the same way. You can make friends by doing that. I think it would make you feel better by being there.

Mom & Dad

For parents living with their children going through cancer, it's just as difficult for them to see their kid, their child, going through that. Some dos and don'ts, I guess, would be I don't recommend pushing your kid to do things that they don't want to do during that time. I really respected the fact that if I didn't want to do something, my parents didn't make me or push me to do it. It should be your decision on whether you want to do something or not, so nobody else should force you to do something you're not comfortable doing.

Difficult times

Right now I'm currently in residence in Toronto. I am in the fashion arts program and this is my first time away from home. And it's been a difficult time, I'd say, but you know, when you are facing difficult things after you've been through cancer, you can kind of use it as a reference and look back and think, "OK, I beat cancer, I can get through another two weeks of feeling homesick or another week of studying for an exam." Anything that you find really difficult, I think you can look back and reflect on the hard thing that you had to go through and nothing's really going to be that difficult again.