


Christian's Courageous Battle

*Written by Claudia Alfonso
& Photography by Suzi Issa*

*As Her Son Fights Cancer, Katy Mom,
Claudia Alfonso and Her Family Pull
Together to Stay Strong and Help Him Heal*



Claudia Alfonso and her son, Christian, who battled leukemia with the help of family and friends

Claudia and Orlando Alfonso with their children, Jonathan, Christian, and Natalie



In October 2009, our family was spending a fun Halloween holiday with family and friends when our 12-year-old son, Christian told me that his chest was hurting. I assumed it was just his asthma acting up from his running around the neighborhood collecting candy. The following Monday, he was seemingly back to normal at school, running the mile during PE class, but he came home that night telling me his chest was hurting even more. On Nov. 4, he came downstairs at 4 a.m. crying and saying that his whole body hurt. He was running a fever of 104 degrees Fahrenheit. I decided to take him to the emergency room at Memorial Hermann Hospital instead of waiting for my pediatrician's office to open.

More than the Flu

In the emergency room, he was diagnosed with H1N1 and an ear infection, given medication, and sent home. Christian started feeling better, and I felt like things would be back to normal by the end of the weekend. On Saturday, though, he began vomiting with diarrhea, and I wondered if he was suffering from something else.

I decided to take him to the Texas Children's Hospital emergency room on Monday, so doctors could run more tests. Physicians there said Christian still had the H1N1 virus and it had to run its course. We received medication for the new symptoms and by Friday, he was doing much better. The pediatrician said that as long as he was symptom-free for 48 hours, he could go back to school.

Then on Sunday, he woke up with a lump on the right side of his throat and a small lump on the left side of his ear. We returned to the emergency room and were told it might be mononucleosis. We spent six hours at the hospital as they ran blood work and took MRI scans of the lumps. This was the first time I heard the word "cancer" mentioned. The mono test came back negative, and there was no fluid in the lumps. The doctor felt there was no sign of cancer.

Searching for a Cure

On Monday, Nov. 16, Christian woke up full of energy and ready to go back to school. We were excited to return to life as normal. On Wednesday, though, Christian came home from school and had lost his voice. I also found out that he had fallen asleep in class, which was out of the ordinary for him. I called the pediatrician, who was concerned Christian had been sick for too long. We returned to the hospital, and Christian was diagnosed with mono. At the time, this gave me an answer. I soon found out the nurse had misread the file.

Christian's condition continued to deteriorate. I made another call to the pediatrician's office and was asked to come in because they needed to talk to me. Now I was scared and wondering what was wrong. A lot of crazy ideas ran through my head about this being some weird virus that no one had heard of and that there was no cure. During this time, a friend called and suggested that it could be leukemia. That was the second time I heard the word "cancer".

A Mom's Worst Fear

When I went to the pediatrician that Monday afternoon, the look on his face said it all. I started crying. He told me to not worry, explaining he was not sure what was wrong and was referring us to a specialist. At 7 a.m. the next morning, we had an appointment with the specialist. After 45 minutes of testing at a children's cancer center I didn't even know existed, the doctor pulled me aside, looked me in the eye and said, "I am sorry to tell you, your son has lymphoma." I didn't know what that was. The doctor explained that it is cancer of the lymph nodes. I fainted. I could not believe my sweet little boy had cancer.

When I returned to the room where Christian was waiting, I told him the news. As shocked and stunned as he looked, Christian only shed a couple of tears and said, "Don't worry, Mom. We will beat this, just like you did nine years ago." Making the phone call to my family was the hardest thing I had to do. We were all in shock and disbelief. I started feeling like I was having a nightmare and couldn't wake up. The doctors came back in and said Christian needed to be admitted to Texas Children's immediately. They sent us down for a CT scan, and by this time, my whole family was at the hospital.

It was nearly Thanksgiving, and as we started the first of many tests, Christian's only concern was missing his favorite holiday food: pumpkin pie. After his CT scan, they put us in a room on the ninth floor, for children with cancer. The doctor on duty, Dr. Thompson, was an angel sent to us. He immediately set up surgery for the next morning, Thanksgiving Day, to determine what kind of cancer it was and what our next step would be. He also told us that Christian's CT scan had lit up light a Christmas tree, which meant the cancer had spread throughout his body.

Fighting to Heal

On Thanksgiving morning last year, Christian went into surgery at 8 a.m. to remove the biggest tumor, which was over his voice box and was the cause of him losing his voice. They told us he may not regain his full voice again. This was heartbreaking to hear. The surgery lasted six hours, but Dr. Thompson came to the hospital for the surgery and kept us updated, when he could have been at home with his family enjoying the holiday.

Finally, Dr. Thompson came and told us that Christian had lymphoma and that it was more serious than we had thought. Now it became a waiting game. Christian was put in ICU that afternoon. Despite the bad news, our family brought us a Thanksgiving meal to share and Christian was able to have his pumpkin pie. Christian was put on some heavy duty steroids that made him feel a lot better, giving us hope as we waited to hear what stage the cancer had progressed to. I kept thinking that since he had gotten sick only 26 days ago, it could only be at stage one or two at the most. Boy, was I wrong.

In the next few days, Christian got worse, and we were told that he had anaplastic large cell lymphoma high level stage four – a very rare form of cancer that had not been treated in any child in the past 20 years. We were devastated, confused, and heartbroken. I kept thinking why, why us, why him, why does this have to happen to anyone? We were told that they were trying to find a treatment, and if it did not work, Christian only had two weeks to live. This was the hardest thing for a mother to have to hear.

Staying Strong for Family

Christian got worse, and we were scared out of our minds. My husband and I sat down with a large team of doctors to discuss options, bringing two friends with us for support. A few days later, doctors began treatment, which showed signs of working. Christian started to feel better, but we were not out of the woods yet. The next six months would take us in and out of the hospital because of the severity of his cancer.



After undergoing his last round of chemotherapy treatment, Christian celebrates with his brother, Jonathan, sister, Natalie, and Christian's Angels



Natalie, Christian, and Jonathan appeared in the Snowdrop Foundation's Pediatric Cancer Calendar

Photo by Alisa Murray



Jonathan and Natalie supported their brother, Christian throughout his brave fight with cancer

His treatment was brutal, life-threatening, and hard to watch, but Christian handled it so well. He was an inspiration to many, including me, as I tried to be strong for both of us. He stayed strong throughout seven intense courses of chemotherapy and one course of radiation, which caused him to lose all his hair, eyebrows, and eyelashes. A couple of days before Christmas, the doctor asked Christian if he would like to go home. We were so happy and surprised.

After the last round of chemotherapy, we waited three weeks before starting more scans. A week later, we were told what no one wants to hear after going through so much: new cancer cells had popped up and Christian had relapsed. But they were not 100% sure, so they were going to do a second scan. When we told Christian the news, he took it so well, didn't shed a tear, and said, "Oh well, they fixed it before, they will fix it again."

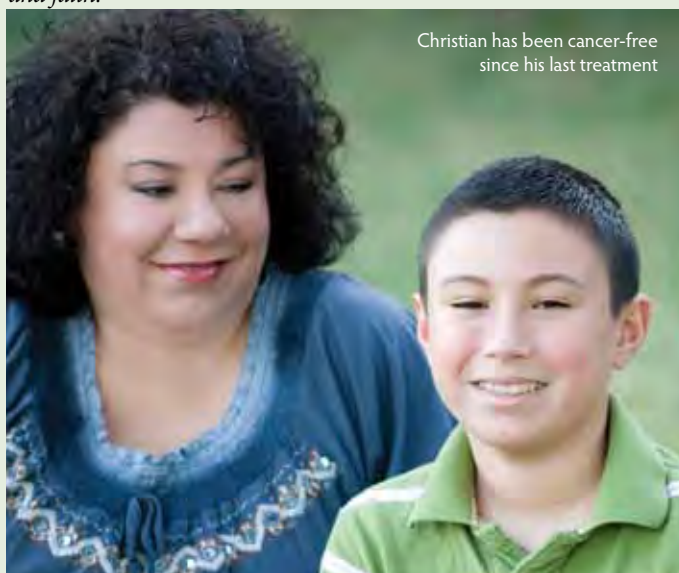
Celebrating Good News

As of today, Christian is cancer-free. We found out on the last day of school that his second PET scan was clear and he was in remission. To hear those words brought happy tears and a sense of relief I had not felt since this nightmare started.

Embraced by the Community

Throughout it all, our friends and neighbors stepped in to help, preparing meals for my two children who were at home without me, and helping us raise funds for medical bills, gas, hotel expenses, and anything else we needed. Most importantly, they gave us their love, support, and prayers. Christian's school and classmates were extremely supportive, too, and throughout it all, he kept his grades up and stayed on the honor roll, with the help of his wonderful homebound teacher. The one thing I have learned is that when you go through something like this, every day is a gift and should not be taken for granted. KM

EDITOR'S NOTE: Katy Magazine would like to thank Claudia Alfonso and her family for sharing Christian's story of courage, hope, and faith.



Christian has been cancer-free since his last treatment

Thank you, Katy!

The Alfonso family would like to thank their friends, medical teams, and the community for the outpouring of love and support over the past year

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