

Samantha Loos-Polk is a nurse at Texas Children's Hospital where she cares for and comforts young cancer patients

Full Circle

Childhood cancer survivor and Seven Lakes High School graduate, Samantha Loos-Polk, goes back to where it all began

Written by Anna-Catherine Rose

The afternoon Samantha Loos-Polk was training at the gym was like any other. In preparation for an upcoming Taekwondo tournament, the then 13-year-old freshman at Seven Lakes High School and second-degree black belt was performing strength and conditioning training. But when she swung a dumbbell as part of a squat exercise, she immediately felt pain in her back and knew something wasn't right. The events that followed, and the diagnosis that awaited her, would change the course of her life forever.

More Than a Routine Injury

Aside from sore muscles following her injury, Samantha was also unusually fatigued. Accustomed to a rigorous schedule with her studies, choir, and martial arts, she suddenly wasn't able to keep up. "I was exhausted all the time, and it was difficult to walk from class to class," she remembers. She also began to develop bruises on her legs, along with tiny red spots on her wrists and eventually throughout her body.

Photo by John Glaser

Concerned and on a mission for answers, she and her parents, Margaret Loos-Polk and James Polk, visited a battery of doctors, and she eventually underwent blood tests. Around 4 a.m. the morning after her tests, Margaret received a call instructing them to take Samantha to a hospital immediately. Her platelets were extremely low, so much so she could have bled to death.

The Diagnosis

Samantha was eventually taken to Texas Children's Hospital (TCH). It was here, in room one on the ninth floor of the West Tower, her symptoms were given an official name: acute lymphoblastic leukemia. She soon underwent 10 days of intensive chemotherapy. And while the treatment effectively fought the cancer, it wreaked havoc on her immune system.

When Samantha was eventually released, she was very weak and in constant pain. A few days after being home, she developed a fever and was rushed back to the hospital. After a series of tests, doctors determined she had acquired a rare type of fungal infection called Fusarium. It was prevalent in her blood, in and around her lungs, kidneys, left eye, and skin. From here, Samantha endured eight eye and four nose surgeries over the course of a nine-month stay at TCH. To date, she is the longest-known survivor of this type of infection.

Destiny Determined

Samantha's journey nurtured a passion within her to help others with similar obstacles. So inspired by the level of care she received from the nurses at TCH, she set her mind on achieving a nursing degree, with a specialty in pediatric oncology, from University of St. Thomas. She reflects, "I knew I wanted to pursue a career that made a difference in people's lives prior to my diagnosis, but I didn't know what exactly that would look like until I survived cancer and the fungal infection. From that point on, I knew the superhero I wanted to be was a nurse."

And now, from the very place she was diagnosed and treated, the ninth floor of the West Tower of TCH, she cares for and comforts young patients facing cancer. "I know I can help others in their battle because of my personal understanding of what they're going through. My unique perspective enables me to treat patients holistically and ensure their families are provided much needed support," she says.



A CLOSER LOOK

Samantha is a five-year survivor of acute lymphoblastic leukemia.

She developed Fusarium, a rare fungal disease, after chemo and is now the longest-known survivor of this disease.

Went through eight eye and four nose surgeries over a nine-month period.

She was treated at Texas Children's Hospital where she is now an oncology nurse.

When asked about her greatest source of encouragement during her toughest times, she credits her parents, who were by her side every minute of every day. She is also grateful for several organizations that ministered to both her and her family, including Harley's Helpers Angel Ministry, Snowdrop Foundation, and B.I.G. Love Cancer Care. These groups supplied parking tokens, gas and gift cards, groceries, laundry baskets, blankets, and regular visits. In fact, Samantha was awarded three scholarships from two of these organizations.

The Path Ahead

Samantha is now a five-year cancer survivor. She undergoes yearly checkups at TCH, along with regular assessments by her ophthalmologist. During her free time, she enjoys spending time with her family and boyfriend, Ryleigh; snuggling with her cat, Binx; reading; and watching movies. She also serves as co-secretary of St. Thomas' Sigma Theta Tau International nursing honor society.

Her story is one of struggle, determination, perseverance, and triumph. It's also a poignant reminder that adversity, when met with hope and a fighting spirit, can be an unexpected but most impactful teacher. **KM**

ANNA-CATHERINE ROSE lives in Katy and is a firm believer that struggle is what connects us and is always accompanied by a purpose.