

“
I know that I want
to be happy and not
sad or mad about
life every day.”

- Caraline Miller

Caraline Miller, a 17-year-old student at Morton Ranch High School, survived brain cancer and child abuse all before the age of 5

Out of the Ashes

Morton Ranch student Caraline Miller survived brain cancer and child abuse, but chooses to be victorious, not a victim

Written by Zilah Miller | Select photography by Juliana Evans

After moving from Katy to Chicago in 1998, my 2-year-old daughter Caraline and I encountered more than a change in climate. Six months after settling into our new home, I knew something was amiss. My jolly, active little toddler began to sleep 12 to 18 hours a day. When awake, nothing she ate stayed down.

As I sat in that dark room with a wall filled with scans of Caraline's brain and tears rolling down my face, the doctor told me there was a mass the size of two golf balls in her little head. Caraline placed her small hands on either side of my face and told me, "Don't cry, mommy. I will be okay." This beautiful little girl was comforting me. Even as a toddler, Caraline had the ability to comfort others.



Michael, Zilah, Caraline, and Jackson Miller pose for a family photo at Katy Heritage Park



In March 2014, Caraline will celebrate 15 years of being cancer free

Misdiagnosis Mix Up

The first occurrence landed us in the emergency room with a diagnosis of carbon monoxide poisoning. After two days, we were back at the ER with Caraline complaining that her neck hurt. A spinal tap revealed no meningitis, and this time, the doctor diagnosed her with stomach flu. Another two days passed, and I took her to our primary care doctor. I told him that Caraline rode her wheeled horse down the staircase in December, tumbling all the way down, and asked if the neck pain and vomiting could be related to the fall. Our doctor ordered a CT scan.

We Have a Problem


When the results of the scan finally came in, the doctor flew across the waiting room and came to his knees in front of Caraline and me. He said, "Peanut, we have a problem."

Twenty-four hours later, she had lost her ability to speak and all her motor skills were gone. My brother John sat in the chair in ICU as I lay holding Caraline. My mother, who never flies, flew from Mississippi to Illinois, and my sister Laura arrived from New York. The next morning, Caraline had surgery to remove the tumor. It was malignant and ended up being larger than expected. Dr. Ruge, her brain surgeon, was able to completely remove it, but said she could have potential issues after the surgery.

Guardian Angels

We believe in the power of prayer. Caraline's body was able to recover, the shunt was removed, and she was up and eating in a day. The first thing she asked for was Chicken McNuggets. She told us about all the people in her ICU room, and we know it was the angels watching over her because only two people were allowed in her room at one time.

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Two weeks after the surgery, we went home. Over the next two months, Caraline had chemo; then, she traveled to St. Jude's Children's Hospital in Tennessee for seven weeks of radiation. Through it all, she continued to recover - even thrive. We expected complications from the chemo and radiation: partial blindness, drop foot, hearing loss, lack of motor skills. None of these complications occurred. Caraline was diagnosed with short-term memory loss in second grade, but she takes medication that helps with this issue.

A Badge of Courage

Cancer is only part of Caraline's story. In 2000, Caraline was deliberately burned, over 40% of her body, with boiling water and oil by her biological father while she was in his care. The third-degree burns required daily skin treatments, removal of skin, and skin grafts at Shriners' Burn Unit in Galveston. She carries the scars today, calling them her badge of courage. "I was given the option to attempt a surgery and have the burn scars on my thighs removed," Caraline says. "I chose not to have the surgery because my burns make me who I am today. Without my past, what is the future?"

You can only imagine the heartache we went through to have just come through cancer only to have her hurt like this. The incident occurred less than one year after she completed radiation. But Caraline won't let herself be a victim. Today, she is a lifeguard in the summer and confidently wears shorts and swimsuits. "I don't really have a feeling for the way that I look," she says. "I know that I want to be happy and not sad or mad about life every day." When Caraline shared her story with the students at the Krause Center, she reminded them that everyone's life has stumbling blocks, but we all have the choice in how we move forward after bad things.

New Blessings

After the burning incident, God provided a new dad for Caraline in the form of my sweet husband, Michael Miller. Michael officially adopted Caraline in July 2002, before she began kindergarten, and has been supportive in every way possible.

Today, Michael uses Caraline's story to encourage his football players to find strength through adversity. Caraline's story has been shared with Fellowships of Christian Athletes, Sunday schools, friends, colleagues, and others who are going through health-related issues. In fourth grade, Caraline dreamed that she was in an auditorium encouraging the audience to be survivors and not victims. This dream is what she aspires to do with her life - to motivate people to come through adversity and to influence those who don't know how to move forward in life. "Things happen to people of all ages," she says. "I am here for anyone who wants to listen."

Beyond the Scars

Now, as a student at Morton Ranch High School, Caraline has a long list of accomplishments that tell a story far beyond her scars: National Junior Honor Society member; recipient of the Panther Spirit Award in sixth, seventh, and eighth grades; recognized as Katy Elks Outstanding Eighth Grade Student; National Charity League member; awarded 2013 Outstanding Newspaper Reporter; sports editor for the Maverick Star Newspaper; ninth grade volleyball team manager; and ninth

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grade tennis team, just to name a few. In March 2014, Caraline will celebrate 15 years of being a cancer survivor.

Caraline walks with her scars every day - physically and mentally. Cancer can strike anyone; it has no feelings or preference. But the fact that another person could harm a child the way Caraline was harmed is impossible to understand. Still, in our home, we love the song called "Blessings" by Laura Story that says, "What if your blessings come through raindrops?"

A Bright Future

Through all her adversities and successes, we give thanks. I know that Caraline will make a difference to the people she meets and the ones who hear her story - she already has. At our house, we say, "Make a choice: be a victim or be a survivor. One will have you miss out on the joys of life, and the other will open doors to exciting adventures." **KM**

EDITOR'S NOTE:

We would like to thank Zilah and Caraline Miller for sharing their amazing story with us. Do you have an inspirational story to share? Email editor@katymagazine.com.



Caraline in front of the St. Jude Children's Hospital in Memphis



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