



Makenna Wallin ready for next round of chemo

By Russ Pankonin

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Joshua 1:9 (NIV)—“Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged, for the Lord your God will be with you wherever you go.”

Without living these words, 15-year-old Makenna Wallin would have every reason to be scared. She’s fighting against AML—acute myeloid leukemia, a cancer that attacks the red blood cells.

In November, Makenna remembers being tired all the time. She was having trouble breathing during basketball practice. She was pale.

They thought maybe she had exercise-induced asthma, but the inhaler didn’t help.

Her mom, Marilee, suspected things weren’t right, so she took to the Internet to do her own research.

She found that Makenna’s symptoms could be a sign of leukemia, but she never told her daughter that.

A blood test at the Chase County Clinic on Monday, Dec. 10, showed her hemoglobin level at 5. The normal range for a teenage girl is between 13-14.

Marilee’s worst fears became reality that day when they learned Makenna’s condition was probably leukemia.

Makenna had no idea until the bad news dropped. “I was really surprised and scared. It freaked me out,” she said.

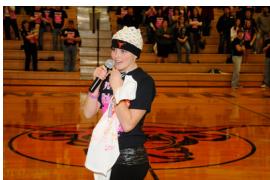
Within hours, Makenna had been flown to Children’s Hospital in Denver, where the initial diagnosis was confirmed— leukemia. Doctors just didn’t know what kind for sure.

By Thursday, Dec. 13, doctors knew she had AML.

That news was accompanied by some great news—doctors told Makenna her leukemia was curable.

With those words, Makenna’s outlook brightened. She knew she was going to be fine.

Marilee said she could see the difference in Makenna as soon as she heard her leukemia was curable.



Chemo started

The next day, Makenna underwent surgery to install a Broviac line, along with a bone marrow test and spinal tap.

The line allows the chemo to go right into the blood stream. The line is also used to draw blood. It will stay in for the duration of her chemotherapy.

Treatment for AML calls for short-term aggressive chemotherapy for a four-month period.

Each round of chemo lasts for 10 days, using two different drugs for five days each and another drug twice a day for 10 days.

Chemo was also injected directly into her spinal cord because doctors said the leukemia likes to hide in the spinal fluid.

For the first two days, Makenna experienced nausea and couldn't keep food down. Fortunately, doctors found a patch that went behind the ear to control the nausea. From then on, she felt much better.

The goal of the chemotherapy is to kill off Makenna's immune system in her blood each time and then let it rebuild itself between treatments.

The primary measuring stick for her progress comes in the form of her ANC (absolute neutrophil count) in the blood. Chemo drops that count to zero. Once the ANC builds back to 100, Makenna gets to leave the hospital for a week or so before starting the next round.

Good to be home

Makenna came home for the first time on Wednesday, Jan. 9, almost a month after her ordeal began. It was great to be back home, she said.

The biggest thing Makenna misses while being in the hospital is not being able to see her friends.

However, through texting and her Facebook page, she's able to keep up with friends and vice-versa.

She can also have visitors in her room, but no more than four at a time.

Her dad, Jeff, brought a load of kids to Denver in the family's RV to see Makenna shortly before she came home and other friends have been to see her, as well.

Pink Out brings new meaning

Last Thursday night's basketball game between Chase County and Perkins County marked the third annual "Pink Out" night, which raises money in the fight against cancer.

Makenna's doctors gave her permission to attend the games.

The girls' teams were decked out in pink and white uniforms. All the coaches wore pink shirts. On the backs of special warm-up shirts for both teams was an orange cancer ribbon, overlaid with the number "23," the number of Makenna's basketball jersey.

During halftime of the boys' game, girls' assistant basketball coach, Chris Sander, took the microphone.

He explained this year's Pink Out took on a whole new meaning because cancer had struck one of their own.

He called Makenna to the floor. Teammates Cheyanne Kuhlmann and Morgan Fisher presented Makenna with a warm-up jersey signed by players of both teams.

Makenna then took the mic and thanked everyone from both towns for their support.

It's that support that's been wonderful, Makenna said.

The first gift she received while in the hospital was from the girls' basketball team from Perkins County. That meant a lot.

The signed shirt will go back with her when she returns to Children's Hospital after her ANC count climbs back to 1,000. That's expected later this week.

Tough on parents, family

There isn't a parent in the world who wouldn't take the place of their child in a situation like this.

But that's not possible.

For Marilee and Jeff, it's meant trying to spend time with Makenna while their boys remain at home. It hasn't been easy, they said, but it's just what you do.

Marilee stayed the entire time with Makenna during her first stay, and plans to do so during the second round of chemo.

She said Children's Hospital has great facilities for kids undergoing treatment. Marilee is allowed to stay right in the room with Makenna and has her own bed. She can also use the shower and bath facilities in the room.

Surprisingly, the time passed pretty fast, Marilee said.

They've also had some fun along the way, like when Makenna's hair started falling out around Christmas.

Makenna said one morning she had hair all over her pillow, her clothes and the bed. It was time to come off.

Her mom wanted her to wait till Jeff got there the next day. Makenna couldn't wait.

So Marilee used a clipper provided by the hospital. First, they shaved just one side. They just left clumps of hair on the other side, before finally shaving her clean.

Makenna said it doesn't bother her to be seen without any hair, although she does wear a hat when she goes outside.

She also wore a basketball-net hat to the games, which was most appropriate.

Strong. Positive. Mature.

Marilee said they've seen nothing but courage from their daughter in this ordeal.

"It's amazing to be sure," she said.

She noted Makenna's strong faith has also been key. She said Makenna can feel the prayers for her that come from as far as Austria and Turkey.

Both Jeff and Marilee said they've seen a mature young lady who's "handling this great" by staying positive.

"I've learned a lot about my daughter," Jeff said.