



Young Tongue Cancer Survivor Displays Wisdom Beyond Her Years

Kristen Morton was only a junior in high school in Austin, Texas, when she discovered a lump in her tongue. Her ear-nose-and-throat doctor suggested the lump was likely the result of her having bitten her tongue and it then becoming infected. Kristen had a nagging suspicion her condition was more serious, but she took the week's worth of anti-inflammatory medication the doctor prescribed.

When the lump remained unchanged, Kristen mustered some grown-up questions many adults don't even ask and took them to her doctor. Why, for example, had the lump not shrunk at all, even after the medication? And why was the lump still hard? She also asked if bleeding when brushing her teeth might indicate something serious.

Her grown-up questions paid off, Morton recalls. The doctor agreed to a biopsy and the results came back positive for squamous cell carcinoma of the tongue. "Now I know what the word empowerment means," says Kristen. "It was up to me to make the best of my situation."

Her self-empowerment crusade continued

At her first pediatric oncology appointment, Morton's doctor and nurse said they had never seen a case of tongue cancer before and were unsure of the best treatment method. So they presented her various treatment options and then asked her to choose.

Many 16-year-olds would have found such responsibility daunting, but Kristen got busy. She turned to the patient information sections of the American Cancer Society's Web site. She also sought the advice of a relative who is a physician. After several days of research, Kristen had chosen the treatment she thought best – surgery followed by several months of radiation therapy.

It's a decision she, her parents, her relatives and her friends are glad she chose. Now 23, she is well past her 5-year mark for cancer survival.

Kristen's cancer and its treatment were not without their side effects, but because of her research, she was able to anticipate them and make them less frightening. Although she faced the very real risk of losing her ability to speak, that possibility did not materialize. She was left with a slight speech impediment, but she learned to overcome it. The only other long-term side effect she has is a diminished ability to taste food, but Kristen describes this as "not a big deal."

Because of the radiation treatments to her tongue, her head and neck were also exposed to the high-energy beams. Morton continues her policy of empowerment by keeping a close watch on her hearing, jawbone density and thyroid function.

Setting an Example for Others

In the years since her diagnosis, Kristen was awarded an American Cancer Society scholarship, which she used to complete her biology degree; next up is earning a master's degree and becoming a physician's assistant.

Busy though she is, Kristen is a major volunteer: She helped start the first Relay For Life event held in her college town of Kerrville, Texas, and eventually served on the state's youth planning committee for Relay For Life; she puts her communication skills to work at the American Cancer Society's National Cancer Information Center in Austin; and in summers, she volunteers at a camp for children and teens with cancer -- Camp Discovery.

Especially at the camp, Kristen has an opportunity to share with other young people her belief that young cancer patients should ask the tough questions -- the mature questions -- to better cope with their disease. She advises them to accept responsibility by listening to their providers, doing at-home research, and asking for more guidance.

In addition to benefiting from her sage advice, the young people at the camp get to see a cancer survivor with a normal, productive life -- someone who has gone through what they're going through and come out on the other side.

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