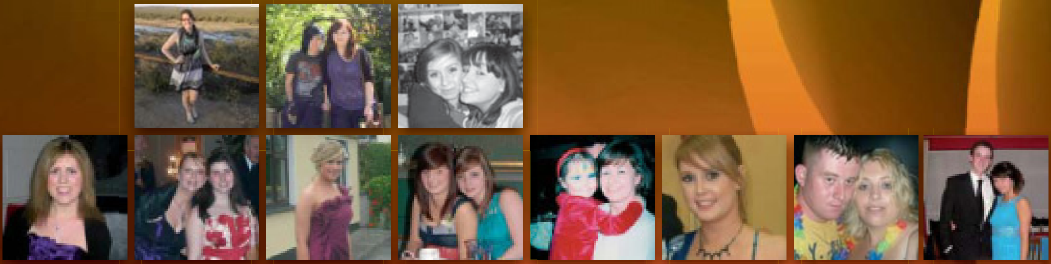
CanTeen
Ireland

Celebrating 21 Years



BADTIMES GOODTIMES

TEENAGE CANCER OUR STORY

BAD TIMES
GOOD TIMES

Teenage Cancer

Our Story

CanTeen Ireland Celebrating 21 Years

We would like to dedicate this book
to all of the members and friends of CanTeen,
who have made this group what it is today.

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DEPARTMENT
OF HEALTH & CHILDREN
AN ROINN SLÁINTE
AGUS LEANAÍ

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Editor: Evelyn Griffith, Group Co-ordinator, CanTeen Ireland 2011.

Introduction

In today's world cancer is a commonplace illness that affects thousands of people. In many countries groups have been set up to help people with cancer, and some particularly to help young people who have to deal with such an illness early in their lives.

CanTeen Ireland

CanTeen Ireland is a nationwide support group for young people between the ages of 12 and 25 years who have or have had cancer. It was founded in May 1990 by a dedicated group of health care professionals. Our aim is to help, support, develop and empower young people with cancer. We recognise the importance of siblings and friends and members can bring a brother, sister or friend with them to meetings or weekends away. Currently we have 250 members.

So what do we do?

We have day meetings where everyone can get the chance to talk, share their stories about cancer and have fun. It is very informal, and there is never pressure on anyone to talk if they don't want to. We organise activities such as bowling, quasar, go-karting and many more . . . We also go on 5-6 holiday weekends away per year, and produce a biannual newsletter, which contains stories and articles written by our members.

In 2004 we published our first edition of “Bad Times, Good Times - Teenage Cancer, Our Story”, which proved to be a great success. To celebrate our 21st Birthday this year, we decided to publish a new edition of this book. This edition contains some of our members personal experience of cancer and how they are getting on with life now. We hope that in reading this book, you will be reminded that you are NOT ALONE, and that other young people have been there too. Indeed this is their story!

Aileen Sweeney

Everything happens for a reason

I can still remember the moment I discovered the lump on my neck. It was a Thursday afternoon after school in Tesco. I was there with my family and my friend, Aisling, because my parents were heading away for their first holiday alone in years and I was going to be staying with her for a week. I was waiting at the checkout for mum to pay and rubbing my neck when I realised there was something under the skin that filled my cupped hand. I immediately panicked as I'd never been sick in my life and the thought of it scared me. I remember thinking it must be mumps. That was the 7th October 2004. But I wasn't diagnosed until the 14th December 2004, even though we got it checked out within a week of me finding it. I had nearly every test possible in Cork University Hospital (CUH). This coming from a girl who had, up until this point, never had a blood test in her life and had slept in the same bed as her sisters when they had chicken pox in the hope of catching them, but never did. Before this, even having my blood pressure checked was stressful for me. If only I knew what was to follow! I had x-rays, blood tests, ultra sounds, fine needle aspirations. I was tested for TB, and eventually my Mum pushed for a lymph node biopsy, as it was now December with no results. It was my first time having a general anaesthetic and I was terrified. I

Aileen.

remember regaining consciousness and thinking that the procedure was still happening even though I was already in Recovery.

A vivid memory I have from that time is being at home one night flicking through a 'Family Health' book that we have when I stumbled across something called 'Lymphoma'. I read through the information and the words 'tumour', 'chemotherapy' and 'cancer' jumped out at me. I was surprised to find that what the passage described was exactly what I had, with the exception of any other symptoms like night sweats and weight loss. I never really thought 'imagine if I actually do have this'. It soon became a joke amongst my friends and I, as having 'cancer' seemed such a crazy and hilarious idea. The lump, which my friends had christened 'Lulu the Lump', became known as 'Tina the Tumour'. Little did we know what was to come…

On Tuesday 14th December my Mum rang the school to tell them that she would pick me up. I found this very odd because I had basketball training that evening and couldn't work out why she would want me to miss it. I knew she must have something to tell me. The biopsy results never even occurred to me because I felt fine and it had been a couple of weeks since they had done it. I remember even joking with a couple of my friends that maybe Mum was pregnant. We went out for a coffee and chatted and Mum then said it – I had Hodgkin's Lymphoma, a type of cancer. I didn't know whether to cry or laugh or do both. For the first time in my life I felt nothing. I remember asking if I was going to school in the morning and mum kind of laughed and said 'No Aileen, you have to go to hospital first thing in the morning for a CT scan.' The next few days were all a bit of a blur.

I met with Dr Seamus O'Reilly in CUH the following morning and went for the CT scan. Not a very pleasant experience, but of course I'm a CT pro now having notched up a fair share of scans (and of course radiation!). Dr O'Reilly told me that the scan had shown that I had Stage II of the disease and had tumours in my neck and chest. He said that I needed between four to six months of chemotherapy. He told me that I would start treatment in the Mercy Hospital as soon as possible on St Theresa's Ward – the adult's ward, even though I was still only 15. I was admitted to the ward and had to have a Bone Marrow Biopsy to make sure the cancer hadn't spread. Unfortunately, because I was on the adult's ward, the procedure was done while I was awake, in my room, on the hospital bed with my Mum holding my hand. It was the most traumatic experience I've had out of the whole time being sick. It was so painful even though they used a Local Anaesthetic on my back. The only positive things about it were that the results came back clear, and the fact that all other tests since then have been a breeze.

The day before I was scheduled to start my treatment Dr O'Reilly came in to tell me that I was being transferred to Our Lady's Hospital for Sick Children, in Dublin. I'm not sure why I hadn't been sent there in the first place, but I didn't mind. I still remember the first time I set foot in the ward. It was like another world – with the colourful pictures everywhere and the bald kids running around the place with IV stands in tow. I was told I would have six months of chemo and hopefully not require any radiotherapy. Things went pretty smoothly for the first few weeks; I vomited, I was tired, my hair started to fall out. I got slight temperatures every now and then, but never enough to require a hospital visit, all the usual stuff. However, one day as I was finishing my first two week round of oral chemo, I noticed red spots all over my chest and panicked thinking it was Chicken Pox, having been told the danger of contracting them while on treatment. They continued to appear all over my body and I was insanely itchy. The doctors all said it was just a virus I had caught, even though mum insisted that it was presenting like some sort of allergic reaction. They decided to leave it be and after about eight days they finally started to disappear. I had a round of ABVD and then when I started the second oral round, within 24 hours I was covered in the rash again. Mum took me straight to hospital and it turned out her instincts had been correct. I was having a major allergic reaction to a couple of the chemo drugs, Procarbazine and Vinblastine. It turned out the steroids I had been taking as part of my treatment had suppressed the allergy the first time around, but the second time the reaction was much more severe. My fingers were so swollen that I couldn’t bend them and I found it hard to swallow food because my throat was restricting. They had to change my treatment protocol after having an international conference about me…it’s nice to feel important at times!

Other than that one ‘minor’ hiccup everything went relatively well, as well as chemotherapy can go anyway. I had refused to have a Hickman Line inserted but one night the chemo tissued and leaked into my hand. They had to inject me with something that counter-acted the chemo and turn the needle 360º while it was under my skin; probably my second most unpleasant experience! Apparently I was lucky to keep the movement in my hand. That little incident was enough to persuade me to get a ‘Freddie’. Well that and the fact I had literally no veins whatsoever left to use. My hair took about four months to fall out because I had so much of it; I eventually got so sick of it that I cut the rest of it off. The next few months were the longest and shortest of my life. I found myself living from treatment to treatment, and just existing in between them. I received so much mail from everyone it was overwhelming at times. I did a lot of growing up. I went to school whenever I could, to see all my friends and let them know how things were going. They even had a surprise birthday party in the classroom for me one day. I became obsessed with the illness, reading everything I could find on it. I knew all the statistics and percentages there were to know about Hodgkin's. This was both a good and bad thing. Even well after I was in remission, and even now over five years later, I'm still paranoid and fixated on the thought that the cancer will relapse. But as each new year creeps by the worry becomes less and less.

At the end of my treatment the CT scan showed an 'interesting' spot in my chest that they hoped was just scar tissue. Just to be sure I was sent for a PET scan. On the 25th July 2005, six years ago, they rang to say that I was officially in remission. In the few weeks afterwards I was surprised to find myself lost and almost missing the routine of treatment, missing the calls and visits and questions of how treatment was going. It was like I had been standing inside a tornado for six months and suddenly it was a calm, sunny day; it's difficult to know what to do with yourself after spending so long adapting to the changes. But I soon got used to 'normal' living again. It was a great summer after that day. And I haven't looked back since! My hair came back with a curl in it, much to my delight, as my hair had been dead straight before hand. Unfortunately that 'baby hair' only lasted for about 2 years, it's now completely straight again! Naturally I have the odd scar here and there on me, but hey, if you've won a war you need some battle scars to prove it.

Aileen.

Most of my chemo burn lines on my skin faded within the first few years and my veins started to unblock and come back. Even my biopsy and “Freddie” scars are still becoming less noticeable, but I’ll never forget even if they do all vanish.

I am now 22 and living life to the full. My hair is longer now than before I got sick and even my yearly CT scans have stopped given that I’m over the five year mark. I merely have a check-up (a.k.a a chat!) every twelve months. I am going into my fourth and final year of Zoology in UCC in September. I have spent the last three summers in South Africa volunteering with vervet monkeys in rehabilitation centres and have found a true passion in primate conservation. I am currently completing research on their behaviour for my final year research project! I fell in love with South Africa and I also fell in love in South Africa; my life is well and truly back on track, but you never forget.

So would I go back and change it all if I could? Of course not. I guess that's kind of the cliché 'cancer survivor' answer and not many people can understand why, in fact I think only people who have had cancer can ever really appreciate it. It's an interesting experience to say the least and it makes us who we are today. For all the tough, horrible times we go through there are the amazing, simple, joyful times to even it all out. People still ask me 'So how do you think cancer changed you?' but they're asking the wrong thing. The real question is how didn't it change me? It's a part of me now and I'm a part of a special community. A day doesn't go by when I don't think about it in one way or another, or something happens that triggers a memory. I've learnt to appreciate life in a way everyone should, each birthday is a milestone, and each Christmas with my family is a blessing. Being sick really shows you what your priorities in life are. I guess I'll never understand why I got cancer, or why I was one of the ones who survived it. I just have to believe that it was meant to be and that it all happened for a reason.

Aileen Sweeney.

Alan Clancy

Dealing with Cancer

My name is Alan Clancy and I was diagnosed with a brain tumour in October 2003, and I'm in CanTeen two years now.

I remember the day that I found out there was something wrong with me really well. I was after staying back after school to play a football match and my Dad came in to collect me. Then on the way home he said to me that I had to go into hospital that evening. But I didn't believe him, I just thought he was messing. But when I got home all my family were there so I kind of realised then he wasn't. I wasn't told what was wrong with me or anything I was just told that I had to go in and get some tests done. But I didn't want to go. I was only 11 and had never been to hospital before so there wasn't a hope of me going in without a fight. So they were all trying to tell me it would be grand, you're only going in for some tests. It was coming up to Christmas at the time too and I had already told them what I wanted. So next thing my sister says if you go in we might get you that remote control car you wanted. So then straight away I said grand, sorted, had no problem going in then. I was still fairly nervous going in but when I went in there was a girl around the same age as me in the same room so I was grand then.

The next day I was sent to Beaumont hospital where I had an MRI scan. It was coming up to the bank holiday weekend that week and

Alan.

there was nothing done with me so they let me go home for the weekend. I came back in then on the Tuesday and that's when it all started. I was in Beaumont for 6 weeks getting biopsies and other operations to try figure out what exactly was wrong with me. I was spoiled rotten there because there was around 30 student nurses training at the time and the ward wouldn't have been too busy so it was attention galore for me. I got very friendly with some of them as well and I was actually fairly sad going home.

After the six weeks there, I went to Crumlin where I had minor operations and sessions of chemo. I remember that Christmas the house was inundated with get well cards and presents from family and friends. It was great altogether. When I finished in Crumlin I was sent to St. Luke's hospital where I had twenty eight days of radiotherapy which was a walk in the park compared to the chemo.

I finished that then on the 9th of April 2004 and have never looked back.

It was a while after that before I heard about CanTeen. I had actually seen the video but because I didn't know anything about it I just wasn't really interested in going. I had been to Barretstown then, and heard about it from people, who said that its really good and that I should go. So I ended up going in the end and it was probably the best decision of my life. It's probably been the best thing that's ever happened to me and I wouldn't be the person I am today without it. Some of my best friends are in CanTeen and they're friends for life. Looking back over it all I actually wouldn't change a thing. Far too much good has come out of it all and I'm so grateful for it…. I'm now in college studying Bio Science and Bio Forensics.

Alan Clancy.

Cancer, Smanscher

It all started on a rainy night in October 1997. I was six years old at the time, and woke up with a terrible pain in my side. Naturally, like any six year old would, I went into my parent's room for some attention. They did the usual cuddles and told me I would be okay in the morning, so back to bed I went. The next morning however, we discovered that the pain in my side was actually from a lump at the right side of my groin. So Mam and Dad brought me to our GP to see what he thought. He checked me over, and thought that it would be for the best to send me to Crumlin Hospital for some more tests. We took his advice and headed for A&E where we waited for nearly seven hours. Finally the doctor called us in and said that there was nothing to worry about and that I had probably bumped it off something.

The following morning, the lump had gotten bigger and more painful. So again we headed for Crumlin hospital and waited in A&E to see the same doctor. Like the previous day, he assured us that nothing was wrong and told us to go home. We took the advice again and headed home. By the next morning the lump had spread further and the pain was unbearable, so we headed back to the hospital and saw a different doctor. I was kept in for tests and the doctor told my Mam and Dad that I was to have a biopsy to see what

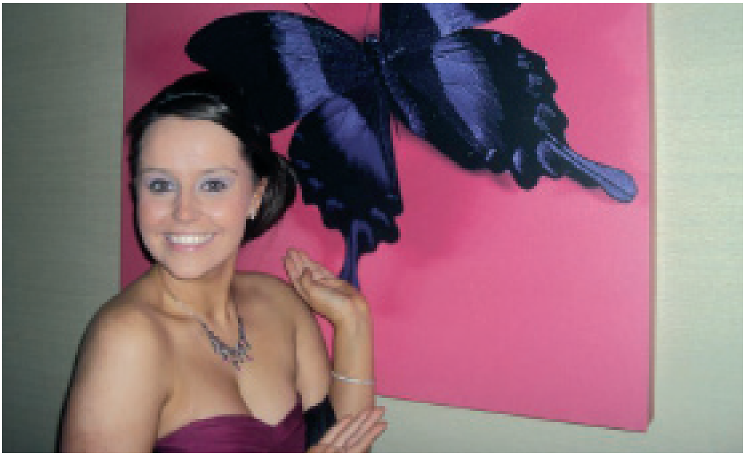
Amy and her Mam, Elaine.

this lump was. They explained the procedure to me in the best way possible, but I being six and very imaginative told them that it was nothing to worry about and that it was probably just a chicken ball I had eaten that had gone down the wrong way. (Yes, innocence is bliss). I suggested Calpol would be the perfect treatment for it (the purple Calpol of course!) and the doctors and nurses seemed to laugh at my uncanny attitude towards the operation that was going to change my life forever.

I had my biopsy and now it was time to wait for the results. It drove the family mad. Between Mam and Dad having to work and be with me, my two amazing sisters Celine and Claire were left with our grandparents and friends to be minded (I'll talk more about them later!) and being stuck in hospital, it was getting annoying. But I remember the day the results came in very well. The doctor called my Mam and Dad outside of my room, while I was stuffing my face with McDonald's finest chicken nugget Happy Meal. When they returned I could see that both Mam and Dad had been crying, and next thing I knew I was being wheeled out of the ward and down to the other end of the hospital. Mam and Dad assured me I was going to be okay, and then we arrived at the ward that was soon to be like a second home to me, St. John's. Once I arrived into a room there, I was greeted by one of the most remarkable doctors I have ever had the privilege of knowing, Dr. Fin Breatnach (or as my Dad would still call him, God). He explained that I had an illness called A.L.L (acute lymphoblastic leukaemia) and that I was a very sick little girl. At that moment I listened and being only six understood small things. Two things however were perfectly clear to me. One: that my long brown hair was going to go leave my head, and two: the lump was in fact NOT a chicken ball.

I started Chemo and realised just how hard this illness was going to be. My Dad left his job to stay with me during the week, and Mam came to see me every day on her lunch break and in the evenings. Cancer talk became a normal type of vocabulary to my family, whether it was about cleaning "Freddie's" dressing (which Mam always did at home) or having to get bone marrow tests or lumbar punctures on a certain day. To say we settled into St. John's sounds strange but it's true, we had to adapt. Sadly I lost my hair, but didn't let it get me down. I got loads of gorgeous caps, beanies, and bandanas to wear so I was delighted. The nurses and staff in general were amazing, and I used to have great fun dancing to the Spice Girls with them, which we listened to on my cassette player... yes, a cassette player!!! I was also put on steroids which made me eat like a monster, but it wasn't chocolate or sweets I craved, it was my Nan's bacon and cabbage, or yellow dinner (turnips and spuds) or Quarter pounders... at 4 or 5 in the morning!

Unfortunately, a few months later I caught pneumonia and was put in isolation. My parents were told that survival was unlikely, and that they needed to prepare for the worst. I was put in room 10, and family would come to see me through the windows as they were not allowed in. That week was a long wait for everyone. My Dad had said for the whole time whilst I was on treatment, a phrase which I really do think saved my life, "Don't let it beat you". So sure enough I didn't let it beat me, and three weeks later, I sat up and asked could I go to the playroom. I don't know what the doctors did, but I don't think I can ever express my thanks to them. A few ups and downs were had in my treatment, and slowly but surely I finally got to my end result, which was remission.



Amy.

It wasn't until I was thirteen that I heard about CanTeen. I'll be honest the first time I heard about it I didn't want to go at all. All I imagined was a room full of sick people and cancer talk. I decided to brave it, however and went and I am proud to say that I have never looked back. CanTeen is the best thing in the whole world. I have got to do so many things with them, like different activities on weekends away (rock climbing, banana boating, archery etc.), got to attend football matches and even be a mascot for FIFA at the last match played in Lansdowne Road. I appeared both on TV and in the newspaper. My life would be incomplete without CanTeen. Some of my best friends are in CanTeen. The people are so amazing, and even though they all have shared the same experiences as me, we rarely talk about it. Of course the option is always there, but we go away for the madness and the fun times. I wouldn't change having cancer for the world. I am who I am because of it, so in many ways it has been the best thing that ever happened to me.

I would like to take this opportunity to say a few thank yous. Firstly to the doctors and nurses in St. John's Ward. You truly are all angels, and no words will ever describe how much I appreciate what you did for me. Secondly, to Dr. Fin Breatnach, I don't know if he will ever get to see this, but I want to say that you are my hero and I would not be here today if it wasn't for you. You are one in a million and from the bottom of my heart, thank you. Thirdly, to CanTeen and all of the CanTeeners. You guys are AMAZING! I love you all so so much and thanks for the memories. And last but not least, my family. To my sisters Celine and Claire, my life would suck without you both. You are my best friends, and thank you for being there for me during my illness. I know I was a pain in the butt and I'm sorry for you both having to grow up so young but I really do appreciate it and I promise I will always be there for you when you need me. I love you both so much. Mam and Dad what can I say... You are both the reason I am the person I am today, and I definitely would not be here if it were not for your love, support and encouragement during the cancer years. I will never be able to make it up to you, but I promise I'm going to spend my life trying. I love you so much.

To the reader, thank you for taking the time to read my story. I hope it was worth the read. I'm going to leave you with a quote which a very wise man once said to me...

"Don't let it beat you"

Amy Boyd.

Positive thinking

Hi my name is Ciara and this is my story of how I battled cancer and became a member of CanTeen. It all started back in March of 2001. I was eleven years old and I had been feeling tired and nauseous a lot of the time. I also had very bad pains in my thighs, which we thought were just growing pains. Eventually my local GP did some blood tests and the results showed some irregularities, so I was then sent to Limerick Regional hospital for further tests. This was very frightening as I did not know what was happening and all I remember thinking was that I wanted to be at home. Eventually on St. Patrick's weekend, Dr. Carroll explained to me what was happening to my body. He described it as my blood having more bad cells than good cells and that I needed to have some treatment, or in other words I had Acute Lymphoblastic Leukaemia (A.L.L). I just remember thinking okay this is fine, probably about two weeks of treatment and I'll be back to school to see my friends and everything will be back to normal.

As you can guess things didn't go that smoothly. I was then transferred to Our Lady's Hospital in Crumlin where I was admitted to St. John's Ward under the consultation of Dr. Breatnach. As I am writing this some of it feels like a bit of a blur, but all I can remember about those first few days in St. John's was feeling sort of numb and terrified at the same time. I shared a room with another girl who was about three years older than me (Yvonne Palmer who also became a member of CanTeen). I was very shy and didn't really know what to say to her, as I was very uncomfortable, as she had no hair. Looking back it's almost laughable as I was soon to be bald myself. I eventually got talking to her and she explained her story to me. This made me feel a bit better as I was beginning to see what my journey was going to be like and I also had someone who I could identify with. Our Mum's also became close friends and they leaned on each other for support, as did myself and Yvonne. I went on to have my broviac inserted and I then began my year of chemotherapy. This involved having two weeks of intense treatment in St. John's followed by weekly trips to the day ward for the rest of my chemo and other treatments such as lumbar punctures and bone marrow tests. During this time I still continued to go to

Ciara and Dr. Breatnach.

school as much as I could, and I even kept up my hip-hop dance classes! Family and friends at home (in Ennis, Co. Clare) were very supportive to me during this time and I remember my first day returning to school after being diagnosed. I felt like a local celebrity as everyone was all about me. When I first returned home from St. John's I had my hair cut up short to shoulder length, I was prepared to do anything to keep my hair! I kept my hair for nearly a year, which was to everyone's surprise, but eventually I just got sick of the strands of hair falling out so I decided to go to a local barber and I had it shaved off!!! I think he was more shocked than I was but in all honesty it was kind of a relief and a thrill at the same time! I soon got a wig but it was worn I would say about three times. I felt very uncomfortable in it and I chose to wear bandanas instead.

Following my year of chemo I had a Bone Marrow Transplant in Crumlin on the 15th of March 2002. The reason I had to have a transplant was because I had a hypodiploid chromosone, which was an unusual form of A.L.L. Before my transplant I had my own bone marrow removed and a week of Total Body Irradiation twice a day in St. Luke's Hospital. My family members were tested to see if they would be a match to donate their own bone marrow but unfortunately they weren't. I found out later my bone marrow came from a male donor in South America. I spent eight weeks in a high dependency unit as I had no immune system. Eventually as my immune system was beginning to grow back I was able to go home. Even when I got home I was not allowed to see many people; only my family members, in case I got an infection. I also had to travel

Ciara.

to Dublin twice a week for check-ups. This was very severe as I was travelling from Co. Clare, which was a three hour drive. I thought I was on way to getting better and my life returning to normal when I received the most devastating news of my life. My doctor told me that my transplant had been unsuccessful as my own bone marrow had grown back instead of the donor's. I knew this wasn't a good sign and I remember for the first time thinking that I was going to die. I was terrified. My doctor went on to tell me that I was going to need a second transplant but I didn't have much hope even with his reassurance. I had a bone marrow test done that day and I was sent home afterwards. Four days later my Mum received a phone call from Dr. Breatnach telling her that I didn't need a second transplant for the moment as my bone marrow test had shown that my own bone marrow had grown back clear of cancer cells. The doctors in Crumlin had conferred with other oncologists around the world and through a joint decision they decided to leave me as I was and see what happened. Over the next three months I had continuous bone marrow tests and chemotherapy. My bone marrow continued to be clear of cancer cells, and to this day the doctor's have no explanation as to why my own bone marrow came back clear. I eventually went into remission and I began my normal check-ups which went from twice a week, to monthly, to every three months and then yearly.

In September 2002, six months after my transplant, I started secondary school with all my friends, and while my hair still hadn't fully grown back I began to feel like a normal teenager again. I joined CanTeen a few weeks later but it took me about a year to actually come on a weekend away as I was so scared! My first weekend was to Co. Cavan and I was so nervous!! It took me until nearly the Sunday to actually start to mix with people. I was so glad that I did because everyone was so friendly. From then on I was hooked and I very rarely missed a weekend away or day meeting. I always regretted not coming along on a weekend earlier. I am 22 now and I will be soon be graduating with a degree in Early Childhood Care and Education. While I was at college it was hard to keep up with the weekends away but I always kept in contact with my friends in CanTeen. Since finishing college I have been able to start going on trips away again. The thing about CanTeen is that it’s a group of friends that will always be a big part of my life no matter how long it has been since I’ve seen them last. It helped me to get my confidence back after being sick and it helped me to cope with having Cancer. It has also given me some of the best weekends away of my life, followed by many treasured memories and life-long friends. Thank you CanTeen for everything!!!

Ciara Seery.

Me, Myself and Cancer

Hey all I'm Dylan or as most of you know the guy who always makes friends easily… (FYSOT 2008). I am going to tell you about my cancer and everything that has happened to me since my diagnosis.

I was first diagnosed when I was seven years old with a brain tumour which was malignant. I was initially treated in Beaumont hospital on the children's ward. I met a lot of nurses who I became very good friends with. The food in Beaumont hospital was very nice; I was addicted to their toast and real butter. All of my family and relations came to see me in the hospital; many had travelled

Dylan.

from different parts of the world including Switzerland, France, Australia and the USA! Many of my friends visited and even my teacher from 3rd class came into see me! He brought almost thirty letters from all the boys in the class – this made me feel loved.

The tumour I was diagnosed with was inoperable. However, I received Radiation treatment in St. Luke's hospital to try and reduce the size of it. At first my hair fell out which was a big shock, and then I got so sick that I couldn't walk or talk, and I kept slipping in and out of consciousness. This lasted for almost eight weeks but after that time things slowly started to turn around. I recovered in my Nana's house in Ashford. All of my family played a huge part in me getting better; right from getting me to sit up and talk to getting me back on my feet and walking again.

When I went back to school at age ten it felt good because I was with my friends but sometimes it felt like a pain because I was treated differently, e.g. everyone got homework except me. Yes I do hate homework but still I didn't want to be different. I had also put on a lot of weight, due to the steroids, so it took a while before I could get back into playing football and was often left out or not included. I was beginning to feel really down and very different. No one seemed to really understand what I had been through. Everyone was really happy that I had recovered physically from my tumour but no one seemed to realise what I was going through emotionally and mentally.

However, my whole life changed for the better when I joined a group called CanTeen. This is a group where I can give love and

Dylan with his Mam, Jackie and Aunt Christine.

receive it at the same time. I am accepted for who I am. I can talk about my feelings and worries with the group if I want to, or I can just have great fun whilst knowing all my friends around me understand me and understand what life is like having had cancer. My very first weekend away with CanTeen was to the Carlingford Adventure Centre – one of the best places I've been to so far. The weekend trips away continue and the fun and laughter continues too. Although most people survive cancer, there are some who don't and we miss them a lot at times. This can be really tough but CanTeen and all its members have always given me the support I need.

Nowadays I am feeling good. I still have yearly check-ups but they have all been clear so far. It's almost fifteen years since I was first diagnosed and it's been quite a journey to get to where I am now. I have had lots of great support from friends and family but CanTeen and my CanTeen friends have not only given me support, they have inspired me, motivated me and most of all, loved me. They have encouraged me to live life as fully as I can and achieve all my goals and dreams. As a result I have just finished a Digital Creative Design course in Wicklow and am waiting for the results! I hope you have enjoyed reading this as I have writing this.

Enjoy life and live it to the max!!

Love everyone in CanTeen.

Dylan Joynt xxx

P.S. I am the Air Hockey champion due to beating Niall 7-2 in Centerparcs at the FYSOT Conference, October 2008!

If you are going through hell, keep going

Hello, my name is Emer. I am now twenty five years old. I was diagnosed with ovarian cancer at the age of twenty two. For six months, before the removal of the tumour, it was quite large and was pressing on a nerve, which made my thigh quite painful as well as going from hot to cold and extremely numb. When they told me I had a huge ovarian cyst and it was the size of a six month pregnancy – I was amazed. I suppose all the focus was on my leg for the past six months and I thought I just put on weight.

In October 2008 they removed one ovary and the tumour. During this operation there was a spillage (spillage of fluid from the tumour which had cancerous cells). When the histology came back cancerous in December they had to do a second operation for the staging of my cancer in St James' Hospital, Dublin. They took some lymph nodes, my appendix and my omentum, as well as a few biopsies. These thankfully came back clear. Following this I was recommended to start chemo as there was a spillage. I was transferred back to Galway for comfort for my further treatment.

To try and protect my fertility they decided to limit my chemotherapy to four sessions – this did not mean they gave me a lighter dose! I didn't take very well to the chemo. I had a reaction, causing very severe pain, which proved extremely difficult to control. This was not easy. I had a second round of the same chemotherapy, which escalated the pain further (this was quite unbearable). I was in severe pain. I waited in hospital for a period of time until my teams got this pain under control with tablets. Although the severity was reduced, I had terrible pain all of the time. From time to time the pain flared up and I could not control it myself. Intravenous pain management was seen as the best option at this stage.

I was terrified of the next two rounds of chemo and did not think I could do it. The pain multiplied a huge amount from the first round to the second round. I was encouraged to finish my treatment but one of the chemo drugs would be changed and the other greatly reduced.

Emer.

At this point I had the pain team and my neurologist working on my case. Along with my GP they were only wonderful and helped me along so much.

I decided to finish my treatment with promises from my teams to look after my pain and get it under control quickly, and not let me suffer this time. The third and fourth rounds of chemotherapy were difficult in different ways. I was sweating profusely and felt very weak and tired. The new chemo also made me much more nauseous. I still had pain as a consequence of my initial treatments, but I was seen every week to tackle any difficulties I was having with my pain management.

One of my lowest points came when the intramuscular and tablet form of morphine had failed to get rid of the pain. I was in, what can only be described as absolute agony as I awaited for a Doctor to attend to me. There were two patients in my room at the time. They were extremely upset to see the pain I was experiencing. I was hysterical and ended up going into shock. Thankfully, all three teams arrived together and I have to say I couldn’t thank my neurologist Dr. Hennessy and Palliative Care Specialist Dr Waldron enough for their incredible work regarding my pain management from then on.

Another difficult stage was rehabilitating myself back to work and day-to-day life. I suffered chronic fatigue amongst other problems for a long time afterwards. I recall the initial few months of my return to work as being nothing other than torture. I believed I was able to work five days, and thought that if I pushed myself I would get over the tiredness. I would finish work at four and fall

Emer and Annette.

into bed at half past four not able to take off my jacket or boots; most of the time not waking up until nine the next morning to do it all over again. I made every effort to beat the tiredness – six espressos between ten and four, caffeine tablets, energy shots and all the health shop alternatives. This resulted in nausea, vomiting and loss of appetite, which in turn depleted my iron stores. I eventually accepted I had to cut back and I did so bit by bit until I was at a bearable pace. Endless thanks and praise to my manager and work colleagues for their help, support and understanding – without it I would not have been able to cope.

I have spoken of the tiredness I experienced when I returned to work – there was also the tiredness in and around the time of my treatment where I might go to town with my mother to get out of the house and on the two and a half mile journey having to put my seat back as I was just not able to sit up. When we would arrive back home it would sometimes take me half an hour to get out of the car as I was just so shattered. I would be crying and saying to myself "I wish there was a helicopter that could just lift me from the car to my bed upstairs". As you may imagine the most pleasant side effect was losing my hair. This did not bother me in the least. When I had such pain I would forget I had no hair, and on many occasions when I would see a brush I would go to pick it up to brush "my hair". This used to make me laugh and I believe the pain in some way helped me not to care about my hair, cancer, or the continuous monitoring that was taking place. I often thought the diagnosis of cancer was more overwhelming for my family and friends than it was for myself. I admire their patience and appreciate the time, care and effort they put into helping me from the time of my diagnosis to where I am today. They helped me get back up on my feet in so many ways.

During my treatment I developed intractable migraine which we grappled with for years afterwards. From botox to intravenous steroids you name it we tried it. Luckily, my neurologist did not give up and a treatment was found. I have so much to thank this man for.

Finally, after almost two years of working part-time I have returned to work full-time. I am more than able for this now and I am ecstatic when I think of my progress from last summer. I think CanTeen is an excellent support group for young people with cancer. Shortly after my treatment I went to Tanagh adventure centre with CanTeen. It was great because everyone understood if you were tired or sick. I missed a friend's party that weekend as I wasn't able for it, so I was happy I could go somewhere. Evelyn, at CanTeen encouraged me to go as you didn't have to do anything you're not able for and everyone understands. The main reason I wrote this article is to help anyone else going through treatment and help them to see the light at the end of the tunnel.

Emer Coyne.

My Time with the Big C

It all started way back in 2006 when I first started experiencing black outs. I would just collapse for no reason and had no control over my body. Blood tests were done and everything came back normal. I suffered from black outs on and off then for two years.

One morning at the start of August 2008 I was sitting at my Mam's kitchen table and we noticed this huge lump on the side of my neck. I was feeling relatively well otherwise but my Mam being the worrier that she is made me ring the doctor for an appointment straight away. So the next morning, I went to my local GP and she thought it was just some fluid or something, but because of my history of asthma she booked me into Beaumont Hospital for a chest x-ray anyway. I had my x-ray done and thought nothing more if it. Little did I know that in two weeks time my life was about to change.

I remember the morning well because I was due to start work at 10am and I woke up feeling great. Did you ever get that feeling when you wake up that nothing can ruin your day? Boy was I wrong. Nine am on the button the doctor phoned the house phone to say that there was a shadow over my left lung, and that I had to be brought into A&E in Beaumont to get it checked out. I told work I wouldn't be in, packed a bag just in case and organised a lift in.

First, we went to the doctor to collect some letters that she had prepared for the hospital. Sneakily I opened the letter and she had the words possible 'lymphoma' written down. I had never heard of lymphoma let alone know what it was she thought I had.

We were looked after straight away in Beaumont Hospital. We were put into a curtained room in A&E and were looked after by a lovely nurse called Janet. Nothing major was done that day only blood tests and another x-ray, but Janet knew already what I had and when I was in getting my bloods taken (which took about an hour coz I seem to have no veins) she was talking to my Mam and Dad outside phlebotomy warning them for the worst. Then biopsies and scans followed, and eventually a bone marrow biopsy – the sorest thing I have ever experienced in my life. All everybody kept saying was "these tests will tell us what treatment" you will need. Treatment? Why didn't they just say medication or something?

A couple of days later I went in for a breathing test and then we had to wait a while in Dr. Oscar Breatnach's Oncology Outpatients waiting room. My Mam, Dad and I were called in almost straight away and we were told that I had a Cancer called Non-Hodgkin Lymphoma. It still meant nothing to me. He told me that if I left it another month to seek medical advice about my lump I would not have lived till Christmas of that year. It only sank in when he told me that I would be getting chemotherapy and that my hair would fall out. Then the tears started. There was no way I could imagine waking up with clumps of hair on my pillow. He also told me that it was so advanced they would be hitting it with the highest dose of chemo they had so I would only be getting it once every two weeks (sounds easy doesn't it when they put it like that). Janet gave us loads of advice anyway on wigs and all that, but I didn't want wigs I wanted my hair, I loved it!! We were shown the oncology outpatients ward – St. Clare's – and a few of the patients even talked to me about their treatment so I wasn't too scared when I saw that it was just drips attached to your arm. I was told that because my veins are bad already that I would get a Portacath put into my chest so that surgery appointment was made. I went home dreading telling the news to my family and friends, but most took it very well when I told them. It was afterwards that they told me they burst into tears when they left my house. With my first chemotherapy session

Emma.

scheduled for the 4th September 2008, I was feeling anxious, sick, worried but also a tad bit curious over what would happen next.

I actually went wig shopping before my first session. I had a really great day in town, trying on loads of different ones and the girl in the shop taught me how to put it on properly and we were gonna go back and get it cut into the shape I wanted.

I went in for my first session and as always it took hours for an IV line to be inserted into my arm. But the chemo went well enough. Of course I felt sick and horrible and moody after it but I went home and went straight to bed. I got my Portacath put in then. We put it into my left arm instead of my chest to reduce scars on my behalf. They tested it out on my next session but it wouldn’t work. There was also a tiny infection in the wound. So we scheduled another surgery to turn it the right way around in my arm, but we never got a chance to use it. One day I was taking my jumper off when I felt this cold liquid rolling down my arm. I looked and there was puss and blood everywhere. So straight into hospital again.

I was admitted onto a ward then to stay on an IV antibiotic drip to get rid of the infection and then get the Portacath taken out. This is when my hair first started falling out, tiny strands followed me everywhere. This part was really hard. I wasn’t allowed to have my chemo until it was taken out and the infection was gone. I was in there about a week before the operation was done, mainly because of my veins once again. After the operation I had to have the wound packed daily by a nurse but I was so dosed up on morphine that this part was mainly a breeze. Two weeks later I resumed my chemo.

Emma and Daniel.

Another portacath was then scheduled to be put into my chest and I agreed to it. After all anything had to be better than sitting in a hospital all day especially since half the time you were poked and prodded. I remember it could take up to three hours to try and get a vein. I was given hot packs, tea, the whole works and nothing would work and with time the chemo started to make them even worse. Well, I got the portacath in my chest and once again, yeap you guessed – it didn't work. All of the doctors and nurses were baffled as to why they wouldn't work on me. I just said I will go in and hope for the best with the veins after that. I didn't want to be cut open anymore; I was already full of scars.

So I went in week after week getting chemo and was in agony from the portacath still in my chest. It was pulling off a nerve in my shoulder, and none of the doctors would believe me so I was left with it there until my chemo was well finished. I fought and fought with them over it but they always won. I was too tired and sick to fight with them anyway. Sometimes I was so tired that I had to be reminded to take my anti-sickness tablets. I got into a routine then. I'd come home from hospital, get ready for my bed and myself and my little sister squashed into my small bed watching DVD after DVD. She was the best ever, even though she didn't really understand what was going on. I think she kept me going through it because she was only four years old and she didn't feel sorry for me and kept the daily routine going.

I had great support from my family and friends throughout the whole thing. They took it in turns to bring me in for my treatment and visited me when I had a few more hospital stays and took me out on my good week to enjoy myself. I couldn't have asked for better friends.

My first ever CanTeen experience was the Winter Ball in 2008. I brought my cousin along and I had no idea who anyone was, but once I sat down at the table that all changed. Everyone started talking to me and it felt like we had all known each other for years. It was a brilliant night.

CanTeen made it worthwhile to be sick, I have to say. Meeting new people, Alton Towers, all the fun day trips and weekends away, I loved it so much that I didn't want to go back to work because I knew I would miss all of this. But that day had to come sometime. I got the portacath removed from my chest under local anaesthetic and as soon as it was out I felt a huge relief from my shoulder. I told the doctors to listen to me – ha.

A few months later another lump appeared on my neck and I was brought straight back in and hospitalised, but tests and biopsies carried out showed nothing so they put it down to an infection of some sort and when the swelling went down they let me go home again.

I’m back working full time since November 2009. I go for my regular CT scans and blood tests every few months but touch wood everything seems to be fine.

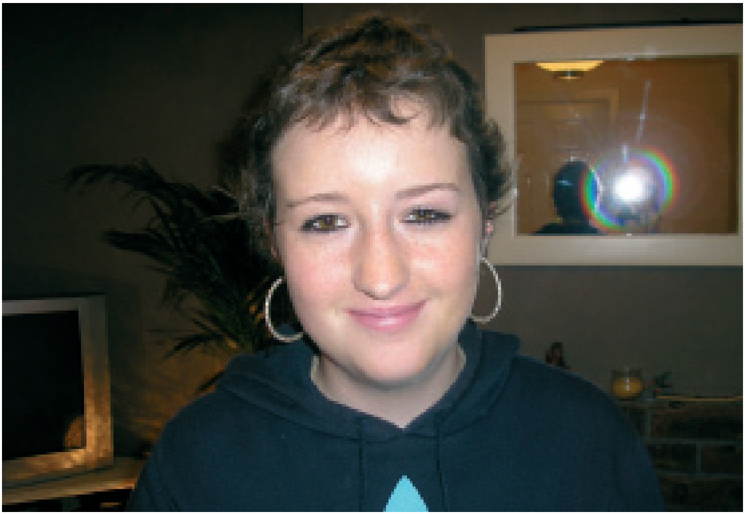
My life has changed for the better in the last few months. I changed my career from being a hotel receptionist to being a Health Care Assistant in a nursing home. At first I was doing a lot of agency work which meant I got to travel all around Dublin to different hospitals, homes and hospices. But I knew I loved what I was doing straight away so I applied for a full time position which I got and I’m loving every minute of it. It's great to be able to give something back to the community after all the care that I have received from the healthcare system.

In the next few months, well who knows what will happen. I am thinking of going back to college to study nursing or maybe I won't. At the end of the day life is too short to make plans so I’m just living every day as it comes.

Emma Campbell.

Fighting Cancer

It was about two weeks before Christmas 2005 and I was messing around with my friends when I noticed that my neck was sore. I felt a small lump but I thought nothing about it. Two weeks later I didn't feel well so I happened to check my neck again and I noticed that the lump was larger. I wasn't sure what it was so I started to worry. A few days later the lump was more painful so on St. Stephen's Day my Mam decided to bring me to Beaumont Hospital just to get it checked out. They did some blood tests and other tests



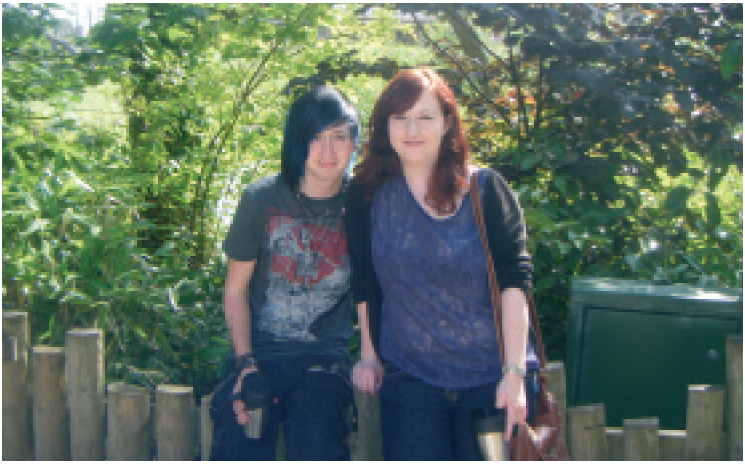
Evangeline.

and they told me I would need a C.T. scan. After that I had a biopsy on my neck under local anaesthetic, but they said they could do it better if I was asleep, so I had another biopsy under general anaesthetic. It took three weeks to finally find out what it was – I didn't really think it would be that serious.

I'll never forget Friday 20th January, 2006. My parents got a call from a doctor in Beaumont and told them both to come to the hospital with me because they had the results. They brought me in to a room and told me I had Large B Cell Non-Hodgkin's Lymphoma. This meant nothing to me so they explained what it was. To me this just felt like it wasn't actually happening – it didn't make sense.

They told me I'd have to go to Our Lady's Children's Hospital, Crumlin to begin my treatment on Monday morning. I got to Crumlin and I was introduced to Dr. Anne O'Meara. The first question I asked her was "Am I going to lose my hair?" When she told me I would, I couldn't stop crying. Even though I didn't like my hair much then – I didn't like the thought of being bald. She explained to me that I'd have another biopsy and I'd be getting a line called a "Freddie" inserted.

It was explained to me that my treatment would be in five courses and it would last three months. She told me that some people have chemo for up to two years so I realised three months wasn't too bad! The chemo didn't make me sick but I got other awful side effects such as a sore mouth and a rash all over my face. Thankfully throughout my treatment I only contracted one infection; therefore my treatment went as planned.



Evangeline and Tom.

I thought the worst bit about it was losing my hair, but I got a lovely wig so it wasn't too bad. I missed half of second year of school but I got a tutor who came to my house for a few hours per week. I didn't get to see my friends that much because I was too tired to leave the house and I was prone to infections due to my lowered immune system.

At the moment I am studying General Nursing in Trinity College and I am going in to my second year. I chose to study nursing because of all the hard work that I saw being carried out in St. John's Ward and throughout Crumlin Hospital, and this is what I hope to do in the future when I complete my course.

I am so thankful to everyone in St. John's Ward at Crumlin Hospital who aided my recovery.

Evangeline Philipson.

Life gets Better

I suppose it all started for me around Christmas 2006, when I began to feel far more tired than a 16 year old lad should be. I remember thinking I must be just run down and eventually my energy will pick up. However, one morning early in January, I woke up and felt a huge lump just below one of my glands. When I showed my Mam she was shocked and said I must have contracted mumps. By the time I went to my doctor, I also had freshly developed spots all over my face. However, my GP said it was just a minor issue and to take some tablets for a week and the lump and spots should die down, which they did. A few weeks later though, I began to feel a tightness around my glands again and feel some weakness. When I went to see my doctor again, he realised it was something serious. So Mam and I went to Naas Hospital, where I was immediately taken to St. James' Hospital. That night I struggled to breathe and fainted when having an x-ray. After some blood tests, the hospital's fears were confirmed. I had a type of leukaemia called Biphenotypic Acute Leukaemia – a rare type which combines acute myeloid and acute lymphoblastic leukaemia. To hear news like that at 16, when your life is only beginning, was devastating. I remember the doctors saying words that I wasn't listening to, but once the word cancer was said it shook me up. I was put into a ward called Burkitts in

Howie.

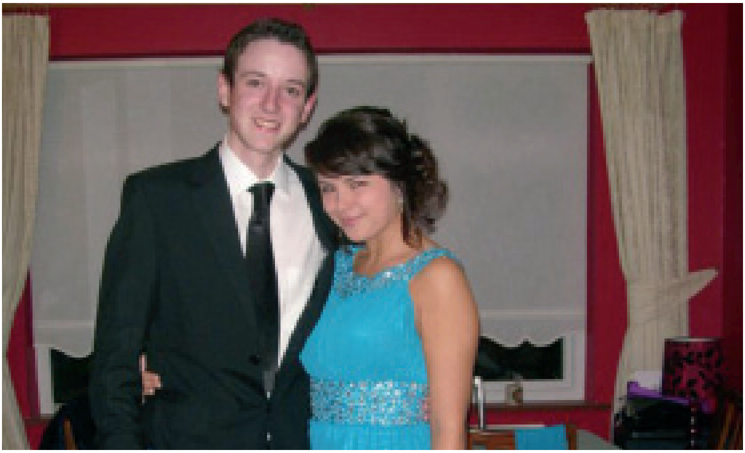
which you are in a room on your own to prevent any infections being spread, as my immune system would be really low from the chemotherapy I'd be getting. The next day, I began my first five day dose of chemotherapy in the hope it would get rid of this nasty disease. By the end of February, they had learned that the chemo had done nothing. I was going to need a much stronger type of chemo that would last one week, starting on the day of my 17th birthday.

This chemotherapy was everything I imagined chemo would be; nauseating and exhausting. However, with the pounding it gave to my body, I hoped and prayed that it may have cleared me of cancer, which it did. I was so happy. However, I was told that the type of leukaemia I had meant it was likely that it would return in the near future and my best bet was to have a Bone Marrow Transplant. My sisters went to see if they could donate their bone marrow to me as having a related donor gave me a better chance of survival.

Unfortunately, their blood type didn't match so I would have an unrelated transplant from some anonymous person, who to this day I'm forever thankful. In May 2007, I had three days of more tough chemotherapy before a day where I would have total body irradiation in St. Luke's Hospital. That day I will never forget. The pain and sickness from chemo was child's play compared to radiotherapy. However, over the next few weeks, after bouts of everything and anything, I slowly started to feel a bit better and eventually by the end of June, I was allowed to go home. I may have spent almost five months straight in hospital to avoid infections from the outside, but if it made me feel better eventually it would be all worth it.

For the next few months my health was really good, helped from the medication I was taking. With it being an unrelated transplant, the doctors were worried that I would eventually develop a problem called graft-versus-host disease, and it happened in February 2007, just a month after I had returned to school again. This is when there's a complication after a stem cell or bone marrow transplant in which the newly transplanted material attacks the transplant recipient's body. To counter this problem they gave me even more tablets to take, like steroids, and the next few months were really difficult health-wise. I continued to go to school as much as possible so I didn't miss out on much. Another problem with steroids, as many fellow CanTeeners would say, is that it makes you gain a lot of weight, particularly to your face. This was difficult and it made me feel quite down about myself, not in a vain way, but more from the fact strangers would be looking at you in a funny way, which was hurtful. I then thought about something my nurse in hospital Lorraine, said about a teenage cancer group called CanTeen. I felt like I needed to know people who were just like me, as even though my friends back home were great, they couldn't completely understand how I felt.

In May 2008, I rang Evelyn and she told me to go to the next day meeting at Carmichael Centre. I decided to go alone which was a bit scary but I felt it would help me to try and mingle with people. The day was brilliant, we played basketball after our chat in the Carmichael and it was really fun and nice to know that I wasn't the only one my age who had had such a past. From then on my confidence began to improve again, and since that summer, my health has slowly improved to the extent where I only get check-ups every six months now and I haven't looked back since. The past



Howie and Shauna.

few years were a tough time, not just for me, but for my brilliant family and friends, but I couldn't be happier now. This January will be five years since I was told I had leukaemia. I'm now two years into a college course in Trinity studying Business Studies and really enjoying it, and this summer I got a dream part-time job working in Nike talking about sport all day, so what more would you want!!

I've met so many great people in CanTeen and it really has helped me feel continuously good about myself. The day meetings and weekends away, particularly the ones in Nottingham and Tanagh, are ones I will never forget. And another brilliant night is the annual CanTeen Ball. I brought my girlfriend Shauna last year and she really loved it too and can't wait to go again this year. My life is now in a better place than I think it would be had I not had cancer. All I would say is if your reading this and thinking about joining CanTeen do not hesitate, everyone's so friendly and welcoming and you will not regret it.

Howard Levell.

"Sure that's the Way!"

'Picture it; first day of fifth year, a heap of homework, a lifetime of plans, cancer just doesn't seem to fit in there. I was such a healthy kid and when I was told I had cancer, I honestly thought it was a joke. I remember all I said at the time was "that's mad". There are no words sufficient enough to outline the rainbow of emotions that I felt at the time. However, from the moment I was told, I vowed to adopt a positive attitude, and even still I manage to find optimism in every situation I'm faced with.

It all began on Tuesday August 26th, the day I started back in 5th year. I had plans of studying actuary in the future and was overflowing with motivation for the two years that lay ahead. We

Karen with Danny from The Script.

were put into classes and spent the morning having nothing but the "craic". That afternoon I went to Connolly Hospital to have a blood test and thought nothing more of it. After going home and completing my homework, I was called to return to the hospital that same evening. Two hours later after further blood tests and x-rays, my world was turned upside down by my diagnosis of Acute Myeloid Leukaemia, or simply cancer.

I had been feeling quite unwell during the summer of 2008. I had just completed my Junior Cert, and so put any symptoms that appeared down to stress. As my appetite worsened, I quickly lost weight. I was fatigued, nauseous and dizzy and nearing the end of August I began collapsing frequently. But at sixteen years of age cancer is the last thing you expect to be diagnosed with.

I was transferred from Connolly Hospital to Our Lady's Hospital in Crumlin after a recommendation from doctors that the treatment would be easier to manage in a children's hospital. That week I had my first blood transfusion, bone marrow biopsy, lumbar puncture and had a Hickman line inserted. It was a whirlwind of activity after the diagnosis, and within the week I began my first course of chemotherapy.

I spent the first four weeks in St. John's Ward receiving blood transfusions and IV antibiotics for undefined infections. During these four weeks I received my Junior Cert results. It's funny how things that meant so much to me in the preceding months then formed an insignificant part of my life. I only woke up for a few minutes to look at them, before returning to sleep. Twenty eight

Lorraine and Karen.

days after my diagnosis I was allowed home for a few days to allow my body to recover before the next course of chemo.

This routine of a cocktail of cytotoxic drugs followed by infections, sickness and transfusions filled the succeeding months. My appetite was completely gone, and I lost a drastic amount of weight, even my size zero pants looked baggy on me. I was hooked up to Total Parental Nutrition (T.P.N) on a daily basis until my veins couldn't take that any longer. To prevent a naso-gastric tube, which I was adamant I didn't want, but to ensure my body could still function I began a disgusting cocktail of Cal-shakes, Forti-Juice, Calogen (a thick emulsion taken in 'shots' with a disgusting taste that coated your mouth for hours) and some high calorie powder, my mother thought she could subtly add to my tea.

Words like febrile neutropenia, Hickman line and lumbar puncture became part of my everyday vocabulary. I quickly became accustomed to my bald look, and adopted the saying that "It's not all about the hair!". I really embraced this look, and it became the centre of much humour for many months after. I bought a wig but only wore it a few times. I bought a huge amount of hats which I still love to wear. I never had an issue with allowing people see that I was bald. Being bald was who I was, and I had no reason to be ashamed or have to hide it.

I was lucky enough to be surrounded by a supportive group of friends and family, who helped me battle the disease. My parents and brother dedicated their lives to me during my illness and for that I will always be grateful. We all had to adjust our lives to a new routine, a new “normality” and they were so understanding and caring throughout it all.

It’s not all bad though. Actually for the most part I have nothing but happy memories of strong friendships created with patients, families and staff. Looking back all I can remember are the great laughs we had. From baking, to water fights, celebrity visits to plain gossiping, the days were always filled with laughter and happiness!

I finished my fourth and final course of treatment on December 14th, which my friends and I have now come to call the annual “Happy Happy Happy Day”. Despite finishing the chemo I still ended up spending Christmas and New Years in hospital and moved to a day-patient mid January after one hundred and six nights spent as an inpatient. I did manage to have a fantastic Christmas with all my family and special visits from Colin Farrell and Danny from The Script. I spent the next weeks at the day ward receiving transfusions and working with the physiotherapist. I was given the all-clear on Friday, March 13th after my final bone marrow biopsy.

Throughout my illness and through my recovery, I have had the most supportive group of friends anyone could ever wish for. The ones who always understood when I was too tired or if I didn't make contact. They visited whenever I was up for it and text on a daily basis. I will always be grateful to them for the support they showed me, and continue to demonstrate even three years on. Words will never be enough to thank them.

The weird thing was when I got out of hospital, I missed parts of hospital life, I'd become so institutionalised. Doctors make the disease go away, but somehow manage to steal months of your life in the process, and CanTeen managed to give me back that invaluable time, and to share my experiences with those who understand.

I have been a member of CanTeen for over two years now. I have formed invaluable friendships, and created a lifetime of memories throughout this time. From Alton Towers to Roscommon, Wicklow to Nottingham and even down to Barretstown, I have had the chance to meet some great people and to embrace my new life since having cancer. CanTeen is about laughing and smiling and offering each other a great support system, which you couldn't get anywhere else. It's the unspoken understanding between everyone that I believe makes CanTeen so special. CanTeen gave me back the independence and confidence that cancer had stolen from me.

I couldn't write about my journey with cancer without mentioning the most important person – Lorraine Flynn. We have been close friends for fourteen years, since we started school together. Four days after I was given the all-clear she was diagnosed with cancer herself. From this our friendship grew even closer. Heartbreakingly, Lorraine lost her battle with this illness recently. She was more than a best friend, we were a family. We were inseparable and spent our time in school playing the "cancer card" wherever we could. There is no combination of words that could ever describe our friendship – the understanding, the trust, the memories, the laughter, the craic, the inspirational character she was and always will be in my journey. Lorraine will always be a huge part of my life, wherever I go, whatever I do, she's there watching and guiding me, holding my hand when I need it most.

And so cancer has had its ups and downs, the friendships and loss. I was under the watchful eye of Professor Owen Smith for the duration of my treatment; a humble man and inspiration to me. My dream now, is to become a doctor and follow in his footsteps – to spend my life dedicated to curing and helping those suffering from this destructive illness. After completing my Leaving Cert this year, I have just been accepted to study Medicine at Trinity College Dublin. I wouldn't change my experiences for the world; cancer found a way to define my character. It has taught me to embrace the world in all its glory, to take nothing for granted, and to enjoy each day as it comes.

Live Strong.

Karen O'Neill.

Life has plenty of Surprises!!

Hiya my name is Kendra, and this is my story of fighting my illness. When I was three years old I started to feel unwell. I had headaches and seizures. My Mum knew that there was something wrong so she brought me to the doctor. They thought that it was nothing but to be sure they scanned my head and found a lump. They then told my parents the bad news that I would need an operation. Afterwards they examined it and diagnosed me with Astrocytoma – a type of brain tumour.

Years went by and I was fine. When I was 14 years old the doctors told me my cancer was back, and that I would need another

Kendra and her Dad, Oliver.

operation to remove more parts of the tumour. So in the summer of 2005 Mr Allcot operated on my brain again. Afterwards I was recovering on the children's ward in Beaumont hospital. A week later I was healing well but I was not feeling 100% better just yet. The hospital let me go home, but I wasn't getting any better and there was so much pressure in my head. My Mum and Dad rushed me back to the hospital, and the next day they operated on me again. This time they inserted a V-P Shunt to drain away all the excess fluid and reduce the pressure. I felt so much better after that. As the summer was coming to an end I was recovering well. But it wasn't over yet. Coming back to school, to start 2nd year, near the end of September I started Radiotherapy for six weeks. I got really tired, felt sick and was fed up with it all. The worst thing was that parts of my hair were falling out.

Luckily for me while I was coming to hospital everyday for treatment I was told about CanTeen by one of the nurses. So finally after Christmas when I was feeling better I decided to join CanTeen. My first meeting was to the National Aquatic Centre and it was brilliant. I got to meet a lot of people my age and with the same illness. Six years later I am fully recovered and still a member of CanTeen. I have been to many weekends away and day meetings. I have designed a Christmas card every year for CanTeen; I also got the chance to go to Alton Towers and the "Find Your Sense of Tumour Conference", the CanTeen Ball and also to be on the steering committee. I was also told about the 'Make-A-Wish' charity by Evelyn by whom I was granted my wish. I got a Pottery Kiln,

Kendra and Evelyn.

with a pottery wheel along with a tonne of clay to last me a really long time.

I want to say a big thank you to Evelyn and everyone in CanTeen for making it some of the best times of my life. At the moment I am hoping to study Montessori Teaching and to still do as much art and pottery as possible.....

Kendra Pauloin-Valory.

My Roundabout Journey

It all started in 1999 when I was just 9 years old. I noticed that all my round necked jumpers and t- shirts were getting very tight and uncomfortable around my neck. My mum and Dad also noticed that my neck was swelling gradually. I was brought to my GP who told me that the swelling was nothing to worry about. But as time went on my neck was getting bigger and bigger so I went to a different doctor who arranged an appointment with a Consultant in University College Hospital, Galway.

After a series of tests and blood tests he came to the conclusion that I had teenage goitre. He told me that there was nothing to worry about and that I will grow out of it in time, but if I wanted to have plastic surgery to cover it up I could when I was older. From 1999 up to 2004 I was attending the hospital every four months for check-ups. My neck was still getting bigger so later in 2004 they did a scan and said that they found nothing to worry about. In 2006 they repeated the scan again and said the same – they found nothing to be worried about. By February 2007 my health had gotten worse; I was getting very tired and started to lose weight. I went back to see the consultant who decided to repeat the scan for the third time but they didn’t repeat it. Something drew their attention about the previous 2004/2006 scans so they decided to do a biopsy. The biopsy took place in March 2007 which came back inconclusive. By then I was rapidly losing weight, not being able to eat properly and feeling very very tired all while trying to study for my Junior Certificate.

At this stage my parents were beside themselves with worry. I was starting to get a little worried to as I was unable to do the things a normal 16 year old would be doing. As it was only one week until my Junior Certificate I went back to see the consultant who then decided to tell me that a growth had showed up in the scan and needed to be operated on as soon as my Junior Cert is over but said there was nothing to worry about.

A couple of days after my Junior Certificate had finished I got a phone call to come up to the hospital and have the growth removed. They prepared me for surgery. My family waved me off and were told the operation would take forty five minutes to an hour. I was

Kerry-Ann, her Mum, Pauline, Dad, Eamon and sister, Ellen.

brought to the radiology dept. before theatre where they told me they had to do an ultrasound to measure the growth. I agreed, not knowing what was going on. I then over heard them say that the growth was now over 9.2 cm. I didn't think much of it but yet, I felt scared. They pushed the trolley towards the centre of the theatre, placed the gas mask over my mouth and said see you in an hour.

My parents waited patiently outside the theatre counting the minutes. One hour passed, two hours passed, four hours passed. Finally six and a half hours later the doctor came up and told my parents that they had to remove the right side of my thyroid as a precautionary measure and that there was nothing to worry about. I got home five days later. I wasn't recovering very well and I was still losing weight. I had no energy and was sleeping all of the time. A week and a half later Mum got a phone call from the doctor saying to bring me down first thing in the morning for my operation. Mum told him that there must be a mistake I had my operation two weeks ago. He then told her that I needed another operation and asked if anybody had been in contact with us.

We went straight to Galway and were met by the doctor who rang me and he explained that the left side of my thyroid had to be removed as the right side of my thyroid was completely invaded with cancer. It was then and only then that I was diagnosed with Thyroid Cancer. When I heard the word cancer it didn't shock me; it meant nothing at that time. I was 16, I was scared, but I didn't realise what he was saying to me. We were shocked and disgusted that this wasn't detected earlier with the previous scans that were done and the fact, I had been attending the hospital for the past seven years with the same problem.

The doctor who told us this news was shocked at our reaction as he was under the impression that we already knew. He then announced that a growth had been found in the 2004 scan and when the scan was repeated in 2006 the growth had over doubled in size. It was now 2007 and in the last three years nobody had told me there was actually something to worry about. I had my second six and a half hour operation and was told after that I would need treatment within six weeks. I was then transferred over to an endocrinologist.

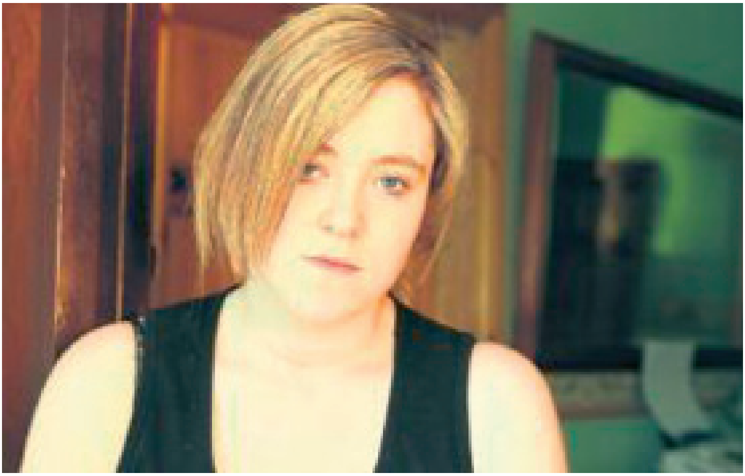
The first meeting with this consultant I was told to come off all my meds as my treatment is being organised. She told me that I would be having radiotherapy in either St. Luke's hospital in Dublin or St. Bartholomew's in London, whichever hospital has the earliest appointment. She guaranteed me that it would be over within four weeks.

On the second meeting with her she told me I would have to have another consultation to go through everything with me. When I got to him he told me that I wouldn't need treatment. I left rather happy until I got home. I wasn't in the door five minutes when the consultant I had just seen rang Mum and told her that he was very sorry but the information he gave us was wrong. I do need treatment and that I would hear from either hospital. That week passed and I heard nothing. Mum rang the consultant in Galway to see what was happening and she was told that we would hear from them within two weeks. Two weeks passed and nothing. This carried on for a further four weeks.

We rang and rang but they ignored our calls. We tried ringing the next day when I knew her clinic was on and her secretary told us she wasn't in today but we decided to go over anyway. When we got to Galway she was there so we waited and waited . Her secretary told us go home as she was not there. So we stood in the hall in view of her consultancy room and within minutes she came out. She wasn't impressed to see us. She went to walk off but then turned back and brought us into her consultancy room and gave us her word that my treatment would be in two weeks.

After the two weeks had passed Mum decided she would ring St. Luke's and St. Bart's to see where I was on the waiting list. She was mortified to find out that in London I was not on any waiting list and they were not told at any stage to put me on a list. St. Luke's told her that my treatment was cancelled by the consultant in Galway because I was having my treatment in London.

This is now months after my operations and no treatment; my health sinking as quickly as the Titanic. On the 14th of February 2008 and yet again I went down unannounced after numerous, unanswered phone calls. She saw me no problem this time and said that both hospitals were lying and that I was on a list in both and that I will be having my treatment in two days. She then sent me for x-rays and blood tests. Three days later, I have heard nothing, so we turned up at the hospital again. She made every excuse not to see me but we waited.



Kerry-Ann.

A couple of hours later she came out very annoyed that we were there and led us down to a room the far end of the building away from everyone where she told us if we didn't leave the premises she would call security and the Gardaí to escort us out. Shocked and appalled at this Mum said: "Yeah do call them and tell them to bring a reporter, as I am going to the media with this". Her reply was "Oh there is no need for that". This was when I tried to talk to her and ask her "Why was she putting me through this hell?" she told me "to shut up, I'm only a child". As you can imagine this upset me as well as Mum and I broke down and cried. She told me again to be quite and that I am over reacting.

That was when we decided to leave before things got out of hand. When we got home Mum rang around to see if any hospital could help. Dad knew close friends who had a consultant in Belfast City

Hospital so we got in contact with them. They arranged an appointment immediately with a Thyroid Specialist who wanted all of my medical history from Galway. So the next day Mum and Dad went to Galway to get them. Mum saw the first consultant I was under. She told him what she needed and what had been going on and his reply was: "I do not like or appreciate any other doctor looking across my shoulder", but after a while he gave what he was asked for. Mum then went to the last consultant and she wouldn't help in anyway.

So Mum decided she would take things further. She got in touch with our local TD who helped her with bringing our story to both newspapers and also radio stations to highlight what was done to me, and make people aware that things like this do happen, and to try and prevent this from happening again. Within a few days I had received numerous letters from people thanking me for bringing this to the media and telling me their similar stories.

I sent all medical history to Belfast and after a further two consultations preparing me for treatment they gave me a date for treatment – the 24th of June 2008. I arrived in Belfast on the 24th and was shown to my unit where I would spend the next four days. The nurse told me that the woman who was in the unit before me left a letter for me as she had heard my story. The first day of my radiotherapy I was at my worst – feeling sick and tired. But the next few days I was better knowing that I would be coming home and on the road to recovery. I had a metal taste in my mouth for weeks afterwards. I was still very tired but getting there. After a year and a half off school I went back to do my Leaving Cert and passed.

I am now 20, in college and getting on with my life. CanTeen Ireland has played a huge part. I am nearly two years with CanTeen now and I cannot thank them enough for helping me get my confidence back and enabling me to make some amazing friends and meet some inspirational people. It’s like one big family; everyone is so nice and welcoming.

I now know that I’m not on my own. Thank you CanTeen :) xx

Kerry- Ann McLaughlin.

My First Hat

My name is Kolm Mooney. I have recently completed my college course in Film Production. I am currently putting together plans to move to Los Angeles in the coming year, and I am also training to run the Dublin Marathon in October. From looking at my life right now few would guess that thirteen years ago I had been diagnosed with an inoperable brain tumour.

When I was eight years old when my parents became aware of a slight weakness in my right arm and leg. I was brought to my GP and after examining me he deduced the problem was neurological, and referred me to Dr. King a Consultant Neurologist in Temple

Kolm.

Street Hospital. She noticed that I had the early signs of a hemiplegia (paralysis on one side of the body) and that it was most likely caused by some sort of block in my central nervous system, so I was sent for a scan of my brain straight away.

The scan clearly showed a tumour on the left side of my brain, a couple of inches away from my ear, on the brain stem in an area called the Basel Ganglia. My parents were told at this point that my outlook wasn't good. Any attempt to remove the tumour with surgery would mostly likely lead to permanent brain damage and that I might not survive it, and that even with extensive chemo and radiotherapy this would most likely only buy me a few years. I was fairly unaware of the seriousness of the situation until several years after this, but knew things were bad.

It was decided that I would have the treatment. This started off with a biopsy of the tumour (minor brain surgery, if there is such thing) in Beaumont Hospital, to give the doctors a better idea of the type of tumour. The tumour turned out to be an Astrocytoma (named for the star shaped cells).

I was then sent to St. John's Ward in Our Lady's Hospital for Sick Children in Crumlin for chemotherapy under Dr. Fin Breatnach, a Consultant Oncologist and a man for whom I have grown great respect over the years. By this stage my symptoms had gotten worse. I could barely walk and was using a wheelchair to get around. I had almost fully lost the movement in my arm and whats more my prognosis was now looking worse. The doctors now gave me only a few months to live, even with treatment.

Kolm.

As I continued through the chemo I lost my hair, gained considerable weight due to the anti-inflammatory steroids I was taking and had lost virtually all movement on my right side. My memory of my chemo is fairly limited, as another side effect of my tumour was that I was sleeping for around eighteen hours a day. I do remember feeling sick a lot and having to be rushed into hospital a few times when I got an infection. For the most part I would say the chemo was the worst part of it all, probably because I felt completely helpless.

As I finished up my chemo and started radiotherapy, I do remember my energy levels increasing and being sick a lot less. Whether this was due to the change in treatments or the receding of the tumour I can't say. I was able to attend school a small bit at this stage, and since the thrill of missing school had long since passed this was quite a treat. This was also the first time since being diagnosed that my doctors seemed happy with my prognosis. I found the radiotherapy much easier to handle as I was only in hospital for around an hour a day and the side effects were much milder than with the chemo.

After all my treatment was finished I started to get back to my normal life again. Although I had to go for regular check-ups and scans (still do today) and I had to go through years of physiotherapy to rebuild the muscles, as my movement slowly returned.

Over the years since I was sick, I've had a few scares when I thought the cancer might be returning but luckily it hasn't. I've had to deal with the long term side effects from the brain tumour and the challenges it has added to my daily life (such a training to run a marathon).

I started wearing hats when I was sick, as a way of covering up my bald head, and blending in. Years later I have a great love of hats, but use them today as a way of standing out!

Cancer will always be a part of my life, in that nervous feeling I always get when coming up to a check-up, and through amazing groups like CanTeen. I am proud to be cancer survivor and I believe everything I've been through has helped make me the person I am today.

Kolm Mooney.

For all my Life

It was June, I was nine and summer was fast approaching. School would soon be a distant memory until the autumn, but it turned out to have been far more distant than I could have imagined! Being a very active nine year old, it was no surprise to my parents when I arrived home with fresh, multi-coloured bruises, and had no idea how they got there. This was one of the first warning signs. Over the duration of no longer than a month, I had transformed from being a child full-to-the-brim with energy, a happy child, to someone always fatigued, always wanting to stay in bed.

I had developed a pin-point rash on my hands, and endured many sleepless nights trying to ease the itch. Following a check-up with my local GP on a Friday afternoon, she diagnosed me with scabies, and ensured us that it would be gone by Monday.

Saturday, the 26th of June 1999 – A day which will always stand out in my memory. I lay in bed all day, feeling down in the dumps, and just so tired. As a treat, my parents brought me a couple of packets of my favourite sweets – Fruit Gums, but as I chewed, blood began to ooze from my gums and my parents became extremely worried! That night as I lay in bed with a fever my parents rang the on-call doctor, who advised them to bring me to the hospital immediately.

I was bundled into the back-seat of the car along with my younger brother Daniel, (who was just six at the time). He was left at our Nana's house as my parents and I sped up the road to Cork University Hospital. Me, in the back of the car – totally delirious, spouting things like –"It's all turquoise, Mammy, look at the little girl's room" – "it's beautiful it's all turquoise". I remember seeing myself in a wheelchair and talking to the doctor. We reached the doors of the hospital: then it all becomes a big blur.

I had numerous blood tests and a bone-marrow aspiration. My first time being put to sleep – my parents tell me the moment I fell asleep – my thumb went straight to my mouth. (Something we can all now look back on and laugh at!!)

On Tuesday the 29th, I was transferred, to what would become a second home for my family and I; the Mercy Hospital. I had been diagnosed with AML (Acute Myeloid Leukaemia) – basically cancer of the blood.

Thursday, the first of July, I was fitted with the most fantastic gift that a cancer patient can receive – A Hickman Line, a.k.a. Broviac Line, a.k.a. "My Freddie". This would become a new body-part and a genuine part of me! (I must admit I was sad to see it go in the end!!)

Following months and months of vigorous Chemotherapy, hair loss, loss of appetite, extreme weight loss, spiked temperatures, infections, isolation from family, friends and school, watching a hell of a lot of TV I had become – by then – a little ten year old nurse, who could operate I.V. machines, change my own line

Lisa with her Mum, Nora, Dad, Padraig and brother, Daniel.

dressings, flush my own lines and read my own X-rays and blood-counts. I was finally approaching remission and was absolutely delighted!

Although, I was nearing the end of my tunnel, my consultants decided to inform my parents that patients with AML (in their experience) have had a tendency to relapse, and so advised them to consider a Bone Marrow Transplant. My Mam, Dad and brother were all tested for the closest match. The results revealed that Daniel – aged seven – was an almost perfect match for me. A situation usually only seen in identical twins!! And that February our family was shipped off yet again to our third home – Our Lady's Hospital for Sick Children in Crumlin.

I received severe chemo and radiotherapy to prepare my body for the new Bone Marrow, VERY generously given to me by my brother Dan – Thanks!!!

I spent three months in the tiniest little box room in the Bone Marrow Transplant unit in Crumlin. No visitors, except my immediate family, and no outside air (the only air allowed into the room had to be filtered). I read my cards through the window, as they were too much of a risk for infection and I (ten-years-old) bathed every day in a baby bath!!!!

After being sent home, I first had check-ups twice a week, then once a week and so on. My brother's bone marrow was accepted by my body and I slowly started to recover, and now I go back once a year! I have made a full recovery now. My hair is back, long and thick, and I'm back to my old self: I think I've even improved on myself a bit!

I am thankful every single day that I have been granted this second chance. I am especially grateful to Daniel for his wonderful gift to me (which I do tend to hear about if we are having a fight!) But I know that he felt guilty for years thinking that he had caused my illness, from the little "play-fights" we had, and the bruises I had! He is often forgotten about. I would like everyone to know that he was so important in saving my life, and I love him to bits!!!! (UURRGH yuck, enough soppy stuff, huh??! Well maybe just a little bit more....)

I think it is vitally important that someone going through a similar experience should “Stay Positive” as much as they can and "Start Everyday with a Smile!" I know its hard now but it will be worth it in the end!!

There have been so many positive out-comes from my experience. I now never take life for granted and always make a point to look on the brighter side, and try my best to enjoy it! I have met some of the most amazing people, the most amazing friends, through the hospital and especially through CanTeen!!!!

Eleven years on, I am entering my final year of college and couldn't be better. I decided to study social care, probably a decision influenced in some way by my experience of cancer. I have wonderful friends that I have met through CanTeen. They understand where I am at now and what I have been through and only they get it fully. We rarely speak about our illnesses now, we don't need to anymore, but I know that if something comes up I can always ring them up for a chat and they know I would do the same for them. My brother has just finished his Leaving Cert and has just about finished holding the whole "I-gave-you-my-bone-marrow-thing" against me. We are so close and always will be now.

Cancer is a part of who I am but it does not define me. So many opportunities have arisen as a result of my diagnosis, and my life has been directed down a path that I don't know I would have happened upon otherwise and for which I am grateful. There are so many positives that outweigh the negatives and that is what you must focus on.

Having cancer lead me to CanTeen and CanTeen has taught me to embrace life, be determined, be positive, and to be without fear in whatever you do… To everyone I have met along the way, thank you for being there and making me smile!

Lisa Parker.

Louise Johnston

I’ve gained from my Pain

Looking back on the past two years, you might think that after being diagnosed with a Brain Tumour (Pilocytic Astrocytoma), this would force me to say “I wish things had been different”, however it is quite the opposite…

It all began in May 2009 when I began to get headaches on a regular basis. I went to my local GP many times and it was thought for a few months that I was suffering from migraine and then vertigo.

In October 2009, I went on a family holiday to Florida. We were all having an incredible time until one night when I became very ill. The headache I had was indescribable and I was also very sick. We got back home after a few days, and I felt a lot better. A few weeks later I began to get dizzy again and I went back to the doctor, but nothing much happened.

The headaches continued until January. I was getting ready to go back to school after the Christmas holidays and the day I was going back I could barely open my eyes or stand up with the pain in my head. On the 15th January, I went to my GP, where I was in severe pain. He sent me straight to Cavan General Hospital where I received great help from all of the staff. It was on that day that I got my first scan after a very long eight months. I was told later that evening that I had a brain tumour and that I would be having surgery in Beaumont Hospital the following day. At that time, I remember feeling extremely afraid. However, I was told that with this surgery, my pain would finally be gone. I was taken to Beaumont that night by ambulance, and as you can imagine not much sleep was had!

The following morning I met my surgeon, Mr. David O'Brien, a really lovely man (however, coming with not so lovely information). He went through the risks of the surgery and I had to give my consent. I am a very musical person and one of my loves is playing the piano, I was told that I might never play again. I was told that I may never walk properly, be able to write and at the end he even mentioned death. This was very tough to hear.

Later that day, I left for the surgery, leaving my Mam, Dad and brother down in the ward. The surgery lasted four and a half hours and I can't really remember much until the following morning.

The days that followed in St. Raphael's Children's ward were filled with many emotions. The tumour was successfully removed, however a biopsy had to be done. On the 21st January, I got the news that the tumour had been benign and from what they could see, it had all been removed and no further treatment was needed. Of course, I was over the moon. I left the hospital a few days later and went back home to Cavan.

Everything was going well for the first few days. Obviously after the surgery, I was lacking energy and constantly tired so visiting from friends was restricted for a while! About a week later, I noticed

Louise.

that my balance was slightly off and that my right foot was not functioning properly. This got worse over the next few days and weeks and we got worried. We were in contact with Beaumont and they said to give it time. However, my balance got worse and eventually we got a referral to a neurological physiotherapist who gave me intensive physiotherapy for a few months. This was a tough time, as my self-confidence dropped very low and I didn't have a lot of courage when I was walking with friends or going to town because a lot of people stared at me. But after great effort and patience, my balance started to improve and I began to get a lot better.

I think back now on those very difficult few months I went through and then I think of all the positive things I have gotten as a result. I feel myself that I have become a very strong person and I feel that I get more out of life now. Most of all, I now live my life to the full and try to live each day like it is my last. One of the greatest outcomes is the many friends I have been lucky enough to meet in CanTeen. They have given me a whole new outlook on life. I look on all the people I have met and continue to meet with such admiration. CanTeen gives us a chance to meet people like ourselves who we can relate to completely. We understand each other, and things that I can't talk to about with my friends at home can easily be said to my friends in CanTeen. Of course, having a brain tumour impacted hugely on my life and it still causes extreme tiredness and headaches from time to time. It most definitely was the toughest experience of my life so far but it has also offered me so much. It has to be said that I can't imagine my life without the wonderful friends I have made and I count myself very lucky to be involved in such a wonderful group. Although I went through a lot of pain, I have gained so much more than I ever dreamed out of this and I am so grateful for everything that I have received.

"Yesterday is history. Tomorrow is a mystery.
And today is a gift, that is why it's called the present."

Louise Johnston.

Life is a Battle Field

It all started in mid-September 1987. I was 2 years and 3 months old, we had just moved house and I suddenly started becoming very sleepy. At around the same time I also began falling over quite a lot. I know toddlers tend to be accident prone but it was becoming a regular occurrence. I was falling here, there and everywhere.

I then started vomiting every couple of days. I alternated between sleepiness, vomiting, unsteady gait, falling and some screaming fits. My eyes also tended to roll upwards a lot. Of course my Mum brought me to the GP who thought at first it was a virus. The symptoms worsened and despite regular visits to the GP, I was not improving. Finally a trip was made to see a consultant in Crumlin who felt my symptoms were due to moving house. He said perhaps to visit the old house and maybe I might settle down. However I got worse and ended up being unable to walk. My Mum was desperate at this stage as she felt the doctors did not believe her and maybe thought she was being a bit dramatic. In early January I was still very unwell. My Mum and Dad took me back to the GP and this time I vomited right there and then in his surgery. Finally we were referred to Crumlin hospital. I had blood tests and other tests there and it was thought that I may have a urinary tract infection and I should be given antibiotics and discharged. My parents were

Lynda.

terribly upset at this as they knew something was wrong and were now even more worried as they had really wanted me to be admitted for observation. That night I vomited a lot and became very dehydrated. My Mum said I was as limp as a rag doll. My parents rushed me to Crumlin again where I was admitted and the original consultant and his team all agreed the urinary tract infection was perhaps masking the real problem.

A neurologist was called in and he listened to my parents' account of my symptoms. He felt it was a brain tumour and then drew a diagram of the brain outlining the area where he felt my tumour was. He said a CT scan would be needed and I was brought to Beaumont Hospital for this. The scan confirmed the neurosurgeon's diagnosis – that I had in fact a brain tumour about the size of a golf ball in the back of my cerebellum. I was operated on the 12th of January 1988 and I thank God for a fantastic surgeon, micro surgery and the neurosurgical team at Beaumont. After the operation the surgeon told my Mum and Dad I should have a good childhood; that the tumour was an Astrocytoma primitive grade and that I would live until I was about 10 years old. My parents were on the one hand thrilled to see how well I had come through the surgery, but on the other devastated to learn my lifespan would be so short. However two days later the team informed my Mum and Dad that the tumour could be treated even though it was seriously malignant. I spent a month in Beaumont becoming strong enough for what lay ahead. I was to be transferred to Crumlin hospital for my treatment.

The oncologist came to Beaumont to see me and he explained the treatment plan to my mum. So three days later I was transferred to St John's Ward in Crumlin hospital and that very night I had my first chemotherapy. I had six months of chemotherapy and I was in and out of St. John's Ward for treatment over six months. The staff were brilliant, despite being under fierce pressure. After I finished in Crumlin I had 35 days radiotherapy in St. Luke's Hospital in Rathgar. It's an adult facility but once again they did their best for the kids. After that I had physiotherapy which was a great help as it got me walking again. I attended the out-patients in St John's Ward until I was eighteen. My tumour and the surgery did leave me with balance problems and some learning difficulties

When I was five years old I was well enough to start national school which wasn't easy for me but I got through it. Secondary school was even harder; when you have a funny walk and appear quite serious in school as you have to work twice as hard to just get fairly good grades it can be hard to interact socially as people think you are a “goody- two- shoes”. If only they knew what had caused me to have a funny walk and problems doing sports and languages. This was due to things taking me a bit longer to process. Unfortunately the year before my leaving cert I became very sick and we thought my tumour was back. But after having tests and scans there were no signs of any tumour thankfully and it was put down to too much study.

After leaving school I went on to study childcare and Montessori for two years. In 2006 I had a very bad accident in college where I fell and hit my head off a concrete floor ending up unconscious – I was in hospital for a week. After some scans they discovered this fall had caused bruising and bleeding to my brain and also there was an acoustic neuroma on my left ear (a tumour) which is potentially dangerous as it can put pressure on the surrounding structures in the brain and also cause deafness. Complicating matters further this fall also caused me to become deaf in my right ear and to develop epilepsy. It has also since been discovered that I have NF 2 which is thought to be the cause of a lot of my problems possibly from the very start.

The last scan I had for my acoustic neuroma showed an increase in the size of the tumour. As surgery to remove the tumour would have left me deaf with possible damage to the facial nerve, my Consultants sent my scans to the European CyberKnife Centre

Munich in Germany. The scans were reviewed by the consultants there and I was accepted for treatment... I travelled to Germany in February of this year for my treatment. CyberKnife is a non-invasive radiotherapy treatment, which allows the patient to have their treatment and return home the same day if they so wish with a minimal recovery time. The treatment is delivered by a large robotic arm and you are secured on the treatment couch with Velcro strapping. An individual head mould is also made to secure the head. I brought a CD with me which was played during my treatment and helped pass time as it takes fifty five minutes to deliver the treatment. It is an excellent centre in Munich and the staff were all very friendly and helpful. I will have to wait until I

Lynda.

have a scan later in the year to see if the CyberKnife treatment has been successful. So fingers crossed that all will be well.

I am now awaiting an operation for my epilepsy, which will hopefully improve my quality of life and in time my medication will be reduced.

I am currently a volunteer leader with CanTeen Ireland and since I have joined I have become more confident in myself as a person. Nowadays I'll go out there and try new things and speak up for myself with the support of CanTeen. Before I joined I thought I was the only one who had had cancer and was left with side effects from the cancer itself and subsequent surgery. CanTeen has been a real inspiration to me as I no longer feel like I'm alone.

CanTeen is great as it gives us a break from our parents (and our parents a break from us) but they know we are in safe hands. Every two years we go to Alton Towers which is an amazing weekend. We also have our annual CanTeen Winter Ball which is a celebration of life and a fundraiser for us, as well as a night of fun for all. It is always a fantastic night.

CanTeen has helped me to become strong enough and battle through all of my problems. Nowadays I have a part-time job that involves helping other people and it is a very fulfilling job. I am happy in my job and enjoying life as much as I possibly can and I also feel that I am a much better person because of CanTeen Ireland; it really has been a great source of inspiration and encouragement to me.

Lynda Killeen.

Mary Philbin

Purpose through the Pain

On the 5th of May 2005 I was diagnosed with Nasopharyngeal Carcinoma.

It all started in December 2003. I was suffering from pain in my upper and lower teeth on the left side of my mouth. Also the bone in my nose was sore to touch. I had strange sensations in my cheek e.g. when I lay on my left cheek at night I felt like I was pressing against something, and when I lay on my right cheek I felt like a mass of something was falling inwards. It was uncomfortable and painful!

I attended my local G.P. and I was told I had neuralgia. I was prescribed Difene which helped me get through the day. In March 2004 I was doing my Mocks for my Leaving Cert, when a new symptom arose. There was now a lot of thick discharge coming from my left nostril. There was also a very bad odour in my nose which I could only get. I was very tired all of the time and I had a massive appetite. I struggled through my leaving cert. I spent the following summer attending doctors, dentists and consultants. At this point I had attended five dentists and three consultants. After a visit to my G.P. he suspected I had nasal polyps, and that I needed my sinus drained and he referred me to University College Hospital Galway (U.C.H.G) for a CT Scan. In the months leading up to the CT scan, I struggled on with the help of painkillers. I started college in September 2004. By now I had noticed a huge decline in my hearing in my left ear.

In April 2005 I had my CT scan. Throughout my college year my painkillers had been increasing and my energy levels decreasing. I had come home from college for a week to study for my exams, and during that week I got a call from U.C.H.G, asking me to come in and bring with me what I needed e.g. pj's etc. They had the results of my scan. The following morning I met my consultant who suspected that the scan results looked more serious than polyps and sinus trouble.

I was taken down to theatre for biopsies. Approximately a week later the results came back, and my consultant was suspicious of a malignant tumour being present. I was then sent to the Mater Hospital in Dublin. I spent two weeks there, during which time I had more biopsies taken. I was diagnosed with Nasopharyngeal Carcinoma.

I was sent back to U.C.H.G to have my treatment, which was chemotherapy and radiotherapy combined. I had a PEG tube inserted as it was foreseen by the specialists involved that I would not be able to eat. For most of my treatment I had to be kept in hospital. During this time I lost my voice for two months. This was a side effect of the radiotherapy. On completion of treatment, the other side effects that followed were – completely dry mouth as my salivary glands had been destroyed from the radiotherapy. Another side effect – was the inability to eat solid foods, so for two years I survived on nutrient drinks. In recent months I have had my throat dilated twice and thanks to my consultant in the Mater and his

Michelle, Rebecca, Patricia and Mary

team I had the pleasure of eating a wide range of foods!!

To anyone out there who has been recently diagnosed, I'm not going to say it's going to be easy. It will be a long and bumpy road, but you'll get there with a little help from the Man Above, your family and friends. What helped me to keep going was music (Tracy Chapman's greatest hits, I would highly recommend it!), and it also helped me to write down my thoughts!!

It is now 2011 and I almost six years post treatment. And after several attempts of trying to get back to college I finally succeeded in September 2010. I feel I'm getting my life back on track... as the script from the famous movie "The Shawshank Redemption" says "You either get busy living or you get busy dying". I now understand those lines and their true meaning, because if you ain't living and you ain't dying, you're not doing either and so you're just existing. That is the way I often felt when I hadn't the energy for so long to enjoy life and it wasn't for the want of trying. You'd think after so many attempts and falls what's the point it's only going to be another setback but you have to keep trying. And don't lose heart. I'm happy now and I'm living. I still have the odd setback but life ain't perfect and it ain't easy for anyone. But the hurdles I have now are so much easier to overcome as life has improved so much for me. It hasn't all been failures. Life is a mixture of good and bad times. And your bad times make you appreciate the good times. Without the bad times we would not know what the good times were. So for anyone out there who finds themselves in my shoes, remember it takes a long time to get your life back on track, and keep trying – don't lose heart. Remember our Lord fell three times but he also got up three times. That's what I always think of. I never lost my faith. Just remember when you're so long trying to get back to life and its failing you and you feel you're never going to get your life back on track. Never give up because it could be one of those times that you lose heart and that probably will happen. It often did to me, but amidst it all I remained positive and kept trying. So never give up because it could be one of those moments that the tables turn and life takes a turn for the better… that happened to me. Life is not about how many breaths you take; it's about how many times it takes your breath away. Life is special!

"Twenty years from now you will be more disappointed by the
things you didn't do than by the ones you did. So throw off the
bowlines, sail away from the safe harbour, catch the trade winds
in your sails … Explore, Dream, Discover".
Mark Twain

Mary Philbin.

The day I met Olfactory Neuroblastoma

As long as I can remember I've always had a watery eye. I went to see my GP who said my tear duct was more than likely blocked. He told me massage the area to try to unblock it. This did not work so I was referred to an eye specialist. I had to wait months for an appointment. The eye specialist told me I would need a small operation to unblock the tear duct, so I had to wait for a date to have this done.

Melissa and her sister Rachael.

I waited for this appointment to come around. When babysitting one Saturday night in April 2008, I got sharp stabbing pains in my right eye. When I got home that night the pain got worse. I was crying with the pain, which you would never see me do so, my Mam knew it was pain! She phoned D-doc who couldn't call out so we made an appointment for the following day to see D-doc in clinic. He thought I had a sinus infection, gave me antibiotics and sent me home. That night my Dad had to bring me into Temple Street Hospital A&E, who agreed it was just a sinus infection and sent us home. The following night my Dad had to bring me back into A&E as the pain was no better. This time we were told to come back in the morning to see an ENT doctor in his clinic.

That Tuesday morning, my Dad and I went back to the Hospital to see this doctor... ENT Registrar – Rob. He put a camera up my nose to have a look and admitted me straight away. The following morning I had a sinus rinse out which give me great relief. While the doctor did the rinse out he also took a biopsy. They kept me in hospital for a few days (missing my sisters' birthday party). After being discharged home we had to return to Outpatients to get the results of the biopsy on the 17th April 2008 .... This is when everything becomes a blur....

I was diagnosed by ENT Specialist Mr. T. O'Dwyer with a tumour of the sinus/orbital area called Olfactory Neuroblastoma, which they needed to operate on as soon as possible. I had a big operation on the 30th April 2008, which lasted six and half hours (My Mam was counting). When I woke up I had a wound down the side of

Melissa.

nose and a pack up my nose, which had to stay in place for a week. I was brought back to theatre to have the pack and stitches removed and went home within a few days.

When I went back for a check-up the following week, my Mam and Dad were called into the room to see the doctor and I was left with the lovely ENT nurse Linda. My Mam and Dad came out to tell me I would need another operation as they needed to remove more of the tumour under my eye as it had spread a little. This operation was done on the 21st of May.

The following week I had to go back to see the Doctor, who told me they had removed the entire tumour and I wouldn't need any treatment. Obviously I was over the moon!! I enjoyed my summer!

On the 17th September I was in my room getting ready to go to a Debs and my friends were helping me get ready. My Mam got a phone call from St. Luke's Hospital to say I would need to have Radiotherapy after all… And would be starting it the following day! This was to last five weeks, from mid-September until a few days before Halloween. These five weeks were the hardest of all my treatment: from the distinct smell of the radiation, to my treatment area getting redder by the session, to losing a patch of my hair (I was lucky that was all I lost).

I had missed a lot of school at this stage so had to repeat 5th year in order to catch up. In March 2009 Eye specialist Prof. O'Keefe had to put what is called a 'Jones Tube' into where my tear duct was in order to try and create a new one. Other than a few headaches and pains in my eye I'm healthy, with an MRI every three months or so and blood tests every few months.

CanTeen has helped so much. They are a good reason to be sick, from the weekends away, to the day meetings, to nights out... Making lots of great friends along the way!

Melissa Gorry.

Niall Farrell

Sporting a new chance: My comeback from 2-0 Down

It should have been a fairly forgettable day. In mid-October 2003, I made my debut for the first year Templeogue College rugby team. It was against CBS Monkstown – another mid-ranking school- I only came on for about fifteen minutes and did nothing of note. That was my last ever rugby match.

First I got a cold. Well I thought I did anyway. Then it started to turn into headaches and gradually into vomiting. The pain from the headaches was so intense as to make me vomit and reduce me to crawling on the floor.

Playing rugby was a no-go then. I had only began playing it after starting in secondary school and had really only started to enjoy it. Templeogue was sport-mad, so not being able to play rugby was like being kicked out of the 'gang'.

Soon enough though, it wasn't just rugby I wasn't able to do. Getting sick went from every week to every day and then every three or four hours. I missed a lot of school, but I still convinced myself in my head that it was nothing that serious. It was just a bug, I said. Just one of those vomiting bugs, I probably got it from eating something "dodgy".

But something was always there, at the back of my mind. A lingering thought that maybe this was a bit more than an infection.

I went to A & E in Crumlin Hospital one night and was promptly sent home. “It’s migraine,” the doctor said, “and you’ll just have to learn to live with it.”

I knew it wasn’t migraine and so did my Mam. But the doctor was pretty emphatic in her insistence that I was sent home. She scheduled an appointment with a neurologist for the following March. If I had waited for that appointment, I probably wouldn’t be writing this today.

My GP prescribed me some migraine tablets and for about a week I wasn’t sick at all, oddly enough. But that was just a lull. Soon enough I was back to vomiting three or four times a day and crying with the pain of the headaches. I lost my appetite completely and became lethargic – I just didn’t want to do anything.

Often I would wake up in the dead of night and vomit. I missed a lot of school as the headaches grew more intense. My prevailing image of that time is leaning over a toilet bowl, hoping that I could vomit so that the pain would go away.

Another image which sticks out in my memory comes from New Year’s Eve. My family had gone to my grandparents’ house to ring in the New Year- 2003. As the bells rang out and the people out on the street began to sing, I was out in the back garden vomiting. I thought I was going to collapse that night.

That was when I really realised it was serious. My Mam went and booked a private appointment for me to see a neurologist- Doctor Webb. Only thanks to her pleading for an appointment, and a lucky cancellation, did I get one.

Niall and Rosie.

It came to the time of the appointment and I went along with my Mam and Dad to Crumlin Hospital. First I saw Doctor Webb, who then sent me for a CT scan. A CT scan basically involves you being shoved through a giant doughnut-shaped scanner – it ranks as the easiest of all the scans I had.

Doctor Webb sent me home for an hour or two over lunch, then brought me back. The diagnosis was the lowest part of my entire illness. I was told to wait outside in an empty waiting room while my parents were given my diagnosis. My Dad then came out and brought me in to the room where my Mam was sobbing. Behind Doctor Webb there was a scan of my brain with a big white blotch on it. That was the brain tumour.

I didn’t really know what a tumour was, so I just sort of thought of it as a blister in my brain. And what do you do with a blister? You pop it. Easy, eh? Dr Webb sent us out to Beaumont – a place which seemed like it was a thousand miles away. I had never been remotely near Beaumont Hospital before, we had to stop and ask for directions on the way.

In the car that day, I just kept thinking about it. There was a thing in my head, a big thing, but I couldn’t feel it. Yet apparently it was causing me to have headaches and get sick – it made no sense to me.

We eventually got to Beaumont and I was sent up to St. Raphael’s Ward – the children's ward. I was hungry, but the nurses said I had to fast in case they wanted to operate on my head straight away. Someone said that this was going to be a big operation – but it still hadn’t dawned on me.

The operation didn’t happen straight away – I had to wait about a week. I was sent for more scans and eye tests and it seemed like a different friend or relative was with me every second of every day. I was told that I wouldn’t be able to eat the day before my operation – so I ate everything I could find in the days leading up to it.

That day eventually came and only then did the enormity of what I was facing hit me. They were going to cut open my head, reach inside and pull this thing out. Then they’d have to sew my head back up again. And on top of that, they’d only shave the back of my head, giving me a really ridiculous hairstyle.

I watched “Bargain Hunt” with my parents and grandparents and then the doctors came for me. I got scared. Looking back, I thought

I was grown up but I was still only a child. I cried as the put the anaesthetic mask on me. My Mam cried too, that was the last thing I remember.

The next thing, I woke up with a tube down my throat and the theme tune to Coronation Street in my ears. I was back in the ward and I felt crap. I think I vomited a few times, but it was hard to know with a tube down my throat sucking everything away.

Recovery was tough. I couldn't sit upright, because the tumour had affected the balance, vision and vomiting parts of my brain. Needless to say, walking wasn't an option either. I also couldn't see at all for about a week, as my optic nerves were damaged in the operation. I couldn't eat either. I had a big tube in the back of my head draining away all the excess fluid from my brain. That was removed after a few days – meaning I have a round mini-scar just to the left of the big one which runs down my neck.

If I hadn't been operated on that day, there was a good chance that the tumour would have travelled down my spine. If it had, I could have been paralysed and left unable to walk again. I should have felt lucky, but I kept asking the same question: When can I play rugby again?

The doctors said I never would be able to again. A knock to the head could cause serious brain damage. I wasn't just barred from rugby, it was all contact sports. This broke my heart and took years and years to come to terms with.

I was a boy who dreamed of walking out on Lansdowne Road and Croke Park. A lot of boys have these dreams – holding out that maybe someday the Ireland manager would give them a call and tell them to get their boots on. It wouldn't ever happen, but you could still dream about it. I couldn't anymore.

After a few weeks in hospital, I was on the mend. My eyesight came back and I learned to walk again. Gradually I was able to eat more too and eventually I went home. It took a few months of half days at school to get the strength to go back to school full time and a lot longer to get used to people staring at my scar, but eventually things went back to normal.

I had a great second year of school. I went to Germany and America on tours and caught up fairly easily on what I missed in first year. But I was still recovering the whole time – mentally and physically.

My Junior Cert year and all the accompanying nerves came soon enough. I still had to go for regular check-ups and it was at one of these in 2005 that I was diagnosed for the second time with a brain tumour.

My surgeon, Dr. Daniel Rawluk, saw me and showed me the scan. All the memories of the first scan came rushing back- the black-and-grey scan of my brain with the big white blob in the middle.

This time I was two years older and stronger. Physically it was easier to come back from, but mentally much tougher. I had to deal with most of what I went through the first time – but initially my biggest fear was that I wouldn't be able to sit my Junior Cert.

This time my biggest obstacle was overcoming self-doubt. The night before my operation I questioned everything. I asked myself why I got a tumour in the first place and then a second one. I didn't sleep that night, I just stayed up thinking. I was also far more scared this time, maybe because I knew how hellish the early stages of recovery were.

I got through it though, this time I was actually only in hospital for ten days. I went back to school sooner too, and even did some of my mocks. I did my Junior Cert and went on into transition year.

The longing to play sport never stopped. Playing sport was a big part of my life before I got sick, but I've found ways to fill the gap. Now I work as a sports reporter, which allows me to obsess over sport all I want.

I can't say that I regret anything though, because any of the things which happened to me have only made me a bit stronger. It's not that I'd recommend going out and having brain tumours, but hey, it's not all bad.

Niall Farrell.

Positive Outcomes ...

I'm lost for words for once. I'm not too sure if it's a case of writers block or just simply of not knowing exactly what to say. I was only 16 months old when my story of cancer began after all. I know everyone out there reading this is thinking what a lucky girl. And you know, you're right, I am so lucky that I don't remember what it was like to deal with cancer, but I do still have a story that I can share, and this is it.

So there was me about 17 years ago, a happy little toddler living life and lapping up the attention. I had just been diagnosed with

Niamh.

asthma and I was at the doctors for a check-up with this when the doctor noticed I was really pale, even more than usual. So they took some blood samples and we were sent home. That night, there was a knock on our door and there stood our GP. A doctor from Limerick Regional Hospital had rang him to tell us we were to come to the hospital first thing the next day. He also mentioned that my blood samples looked more like water, and that he was very anxious. So we set off for Limerick bright and early next day, where more tests were done and I then received my first of many lumbar punctures. It was the results of this lumbar puncture that allowed the doctors to diagnose me with A.L.L. I was diagnosed on a Friday in April 1994 and was sent to Dublin that Sunday.

I settled in quite nicely at Our Lady's Hospital in Crumlin, with thanks to the work of the nurses and doctors who worked there, with whom I developed a great relationship. "Freddie" and I on the other hand had a relationship full of nothing other than hatred, and I must admit to purposely dislodging it a few times. I started my chemo in April and finished in October of the same year. I feel blessed that I only had a six month course of chemotherapy and I know that that is due to the great work of the doctor in detecting the cancer in its earliest stages. I am so thankful that he was as thorough as he was in his work. If he had not been, who knows what may have been different today.

To this day, I feel complete guilt when I reflect on my illness, as the greatest toll was taken on my parents and family, despite me fighting the disease. Six months does not sound like a long time,

Sinead and Niamh.

but when you have three other children to look after and you live in west Clare and have to commute to Dublin so often, it is too long. It is also a very long time when you are entering your teens or are four years old and your parents are not around all that often. My parents put their lives on hold for those six months as they had to bring me up and down to Dublin every second week. Many people would not contemplate such a long journey with a 2 year old who is healthy, never mind one who is sick and run down! My older brothers and sister spent that time worrying, wondering how I was, hoping that I was going to be okay, and sometimes spending over a week without contact with at least one parent.

Although I do not remember being ill, I have always known I was seriously sick as a child and so it still has affected me in some ways. Because I was so young when I fought cancer, growing up I tended to hide it from my friends, like it was something to be ashamed of. It made me different to all the others in my class, and that's something I did not appreciate growing up. I hid it from all of them for years, never feeling brave enough to tell them that the reason I had to go to Dublin sometimes during the year was for a check-up in Crumlin and not just a shopping trip like I had said. As a result, I never felt like any of my friends knew the real me.

However, being a cancer survivor made me realise that all I ever want to do is to help those who are sick. I liked the idea of being able to say, I was as sick as you before and look at me now! You can beat it, like I did. I thought maybe if I was a nurse who was sick as a child I could offer a lot of support as I had maybe more of an understanding of the whole experience. I am happy to say that that dream is in the process of being fulfilled. I am currently studying general nursing in NUI Galway, and I love it! I am going into my second year now and cannot wait to get stuck in again. I can't help but feel that if I had not been sick and experienced hospitals and encountered doctors and nurses that I would not have even considered studying to be a nurse.

Cancer had negative and positive effects on my life. But thankfully I found CanTeen and now the effects are solely positive. CanTeen has helped me face my experience and I now know that defeating cancer is nothing to be ashamed of. It really is something to be proud of. And I am. I am a PROUD member of CanTeen. All of my friends know the real Niamh Galbraith now and it is a really good feeling. I will never feel the need to hide my experience with cancer again!

Niamh Galbraith

Twice in one Family

In 2001, my brother Ian found a lump in his neck. My Mum took him to hospital and he was diagnosed with Hodgkin Lymphoma. I wasn't really aware of what was happening as I was only around nine years old. But I did know he had cancer. I remember going into Tallaght hospital to see him while he was an in-patient, he showed me all the different wires he was hooked up to. I remember finding it all fascinating but it didn't faze me much. I also went with him once to see him get radiotherapy. My sister and I were given a tour of the room where the radiotherapy took place and then we got to watch in another room on a television as Ian was being treated. This is all I can remember of Ian being sick.

Then in 2005 I was on holidays with my grandparents in Tramore. For the first time ever I had gotten sun burnt. I wasn't used to it so I couldn't help but scratch and peel the skin that was flaking off my neck and shoulders. As I was scratching my neck I felt something under my skin and every time I touched it, it would move. It was when I could grab the lump with my whole hand I started to worry. It was a weird egg shape. I tried to convince myself I had swallowed a whole egg the wrong way but sadly I knew that was not what it was. As the holiday was a few days from finishing I decided to tell my grandparents. They felt the lump and knew it was not normal. They were frightened and didn't know how to tell my parents but they knew they had to call them. Once my parents got the call my mum said it was probably nothing, my glands where probably up or something. So we carried on with the holiday. I still couldn't stop playing with the lump and my grandparents knew it was worrying me so we ended the holiday early.

Once I got home, my parents were getting ready for a family party and I was all forgotten about. They were just happy I was home. My parents decided to take me and the rest of my family to the party. I was completely distracted at the party so even I forgot about the lump. But as the party was winding down and people where leaving I remembered the lump. I went to where my Mum was sitting and she was busy talking so I stood beside her playing with the lump until she noticed me. She felt the lump and immediately an alarm went off in her head but she needed someone to confirm this. My Dad felt it and the alarm also rang in his head. We were meant to be going to Donegal the next day but my Mum decided she would stay back with me, and the rest of the family would go and we would then follow them.

The next morning as my family packed up the car, with everyone's clothes including mine and my Mum's and all of the food, thinking we would be up later that day. My mum and I went to my GP. When he saw me he felt the lump and did whatever testing he felt he had to do. He decided I had to have an x-ray but nowhere was open that weekend. So three hours later with a letter for a hospital we had decided I would go to Crumlin hospital to get

Stephen, Áine, Mum, Myra, Orlaith and Ian.

the x-ray on the following Monday. Then I had one of the best weekends ever. My Mum and I had to go shopping to get food and clothes as there was none in the house, but we ended up having take-away and we went to the cinema with my cousins. I wasn't to know this would be the last "normal-ish" weekend for the next year or so.

On Monday, I arrived in Crumlin hospital and we went straight to the X-ray department as our letter instructed. I was given a blue gown and asked to put it on, it was so surreal. Then I was asked the one question a twelve year old would never expect to be asked "is there any chance you could be pregnant?" my mind went into shock. I wondered how could a twelve year old be pregnant. My Mum laughed and answered for me very politely with a "No". Then, I was placed up against a board on a metal platform and I was asked to take a deep breath and it was over. Once I was back in my clothes I didn't know what to do with the blue gown so I took it with me to find out what to do with it. My Mum got great a laugh out of this, as I was meant to leave it in the room. About an hour later sitting around the x-ray waiting room, Dr. Anne O'Meara who was Ian's Consultant came down to meet Mum and I. She explained that the lump could be cancerous but it wasn't for certain so I had to have a biopsy the following day. So once I went to sleep that night I had to fast until the operation. When I got into the hospital I had a cannula placed in my arm and I was made put on a lovely blue gown again for that. I was then given a tour of the operating theatre. They hooked me up to the machines and they showed me the heart monitor machine which they attached to one of my fingers and toes. Then I was told to wag a finger or toe and I could see the number change very slightly. After the operation I was brought back to my bed and was given biscuits and 7-Up. Then I had to have a Heart ECHO. I was brought up in a wheelchair because I was still groggy from the operation but they made the mistake of letting me try to wheel myself around. I ran over toes and ran into walls. The nurses then decided to push me. The heart ECHO was amazing; I will always remember thinking it looked like three jazz men singing. I really like the idea of being able to see my insides without having to be opened.

On the Thursday after the operation my Mum got a call from Dr. Anne O'Meara; I had cancer; I had Hodgkin Lymphoma just like my brother. My Mum didn't know how to tell me so she ran into our neighbour's house, who is a nurse who she knew, would be able to console her. Then she called my Dad who right then decided he was coming home. My Mum then brought me into our front room and told me the news. We spent hours crying, thinking how did this happen, "Why us, Why again?" We eventually stopped and we had to force ourselves to eat. When the rest of the family got home, we all had a cuddle and Aine and Ian had a few presents for me. Aine gave me a little red teddy that said get well and Ian gave me a toy dog that was actually a pencil case. Ian found it really hard to hear I was sick as he seemed to blame himself. He thought it was his fault I got sick, but if it wasn't for him we would have never realised I was sick.

We went into the hospital the following day to find out I needed chemotherapy and had to have a Hickman or a "Freddie" placed in my veins leading to my heart so I could just have the chemo pumped through it. There were many problems with the Hickman; mainly I couldn't get it wet so I wasn't allowed to shower. My Mum also had to learn how to clean it. When I got this placed in me the doctors also took some bone marrow for testing. The doctors were talking to me like I was an adult as they were telling me about my chemo but I didn't understand. I barely listened: I knew what was happening to me would happen and I would have to deal with it. The one thing I heard was I was definitely going to lose my hair and I broke down. I cried, even though I was a tom boy, I even wore some of my brother's hand- me-downs. My hair was what made me a girl. The doctors wanted to know if the cancer was genetic, so Ian was taken in to be tested. He had to have bone marrow taken and then he was made go for more regular check-ups. My parents also gave blood to see if it was genetic but we found out it wasn't, we were just unlucky.

The chemo started fairly rapidly and it was intense. I would have six hours of it pumped into my "Freddie" a few times a week and then I had to take steroids and some other things but I couldn't swallow tablets. I would gag on them and be sick so my Mum did another call to our neighbour who told us to put them into yogurt and luckily that worked. They chemo took very long and very sickening. I went from a size 8 to a size 16 from the steroids and my nails turned green. My skin was very sensitive, no- one could touch me because it hurt. I had to move out of the bedroom I shared with Aine in case she got sick because I would catch it and it could delay my chemo. When my hair started to fall out I was surprisingly okay with it. I wouldn't stay in anyone else's house because of it as I would wake up every day with it on my pillow. I stayed in my aunt's house once and I got up two hours early just to clean it up. I piled it into my bag because I didn't want her to see it if she opened a bin. But when I was at home I would make wigs for my bald Dad. I eventually got a half wig which had no top on it so my head wouldn't overheat. It had to be worn with a bandana or a hat. I never wore it; Ian wore it more than I did. Even one of my teachers wore it. I just went around in bandanas; I had many varieties and many colours of bandanas. My favourite was a light blue one but I mainly wore a black one.

Every month or so I had to have CT scans and half way through treatment I had a PET Scan. The CT Scan reminded me of a polo mint which I just rotated in and out of. The PET scan is like an elongated polo, but I had to be injected with radioactive glucose and lie still with my eyes closed and music to entertain me for two hours. I then had to go into the PET scanner and it lasted thirty minutes it rocked back and forwards. I couldn't help but fall asleep.

I was starting secondary school that September. My Mum asked me to take the year off, but I refused, I wanted to be with my friends. So my Mum dragged me into the school in August and explained the situation to the Principal so she knew if I was sick I was to go straight home. I went to school as much as I could. I missed about two days a week and I had lots of half days. It was hard to adjust to a new school where I didn't know anyone and I was the bald fat freak. I was picked on because I was different, but I never said anything I just took it. I realised later that no one understood, they were only twelve and most wouldn't have come across someone sick or a parent would try hiding them from something like that. But I accept now that no one understood and it did make me a stronger and more understanding person. Otherwise the school were great, the teachers were so helpful, if I missed classes they helped me catch up. If I was tired or anything they would make the class easier but not making it to look like it was for me. They helped me by trying to make me feel normal, not a sick teenager.

During my treatment Ian tore a ligament playing rugby and ended up on St Michael's Ward because the doctors were unsure what exactly was wrong so he had to have surgery. The day after he had surgery I had to go into St. John's Ward for chemo. My Dad was working so my Mum took Áine with her. When my Mum was with me, Áine was with Ian and they would switch so neither of us was left on our own. It was quite funny. When my chemo was done I got to go see Ian but only if I wore my mask. It was one of the funny moments of being sick.

In February 2006 I was told I was clear – the cancer was gone, so I was to get the "Freddie" removed. It was the best day when I got to have a shower. I was finally fully clean. But then the doctors found an infection in the 'Freddie' so I had to be tested with swab samples to see if I had it. I did the swab samples one morning and then went to school but I ended feeling sick in school so I went home and had a sleep. I then woke up with a temperature and ended up being rushed into hospital and I was put into isolation for a week. It was horrible. I had no toilet in my room so I had to use a portable toilet which wasn't the nicest. The doctors tried to get blood out of me and my veins had all collapsed from the chemo so they couldn't get blood. They tried my fingers and my toes but my blood would clot immediately. Eventually I was allowed home once my temperature went down and we were given the news that the infection in the "Freddie" had developed when going from the theatre to the Laboratory. I was finally out of hospital and then only had to go back for six week check-ups. Once my hair started to grow back I stopped wearing bandanas even though you could still see my scalp but I went around proud.

I joined CanTeen in the August after I was diagnosed and it was the best thing I ever did. I was lucky I got to join with Ian so I had someone there if I needed them, but I didn't. Everyone was so friendly and I was made feel like normal. It was nice going in seeing other bald people besides me. I have had so much fun and because of CanTeen I got to do so many things like go to different adventure centres. I got to go to Alton Towers; I went to the Teenage Cancer Trust conference in Nottingham and got to meet people from all over the world. I also got the chance to join TeenLink which is an amazing thing – getting to go into the hospital and talk to newly diagnosed teenagers. CanTeen helped me throughout being sick and still helps me today. It has made me who I am today – an outgoing not so shy young woman. If I didn't join CanTeen my life would be missing a piece. I have made so many friends that I know will be friends for life.

It is now August 2011 and Ian and I are completely clear and well. My last ever check-up will be in December and it will be a sad moment as I won't have the safety of the hospital, but I still have CanTeen.

Orlaith Hanrahan.

Paudy Byrne

Lucky Man

As far as I can remember it all began when I started secondary school back in 1999. I was a carefree 13 year old but suddenly one day I began vomiting for no reason. This started the ball rolling for other symptoms such as massive headaches, extreme weight loss, forgetfulness, blurred vision and severe depression to name but a few. Over the following year my health and vision really deteriorated. They thought a strain on my eyes was causing the headaches and I was prescribed glasses. I weighed six stone, my head felt like it would explode etc and yet doctors could find nothing medically wrong with me. They thought it was psychological. In July 2001, I collapsed in my aunt's house in Ennis. The local GP diagnosed me as having depression but this was just a symptom of the illness. It was a very surreal time as I only remember a few minutes of the next couple of weeks. Family were afraid to leave me alone because of the depression. On the 18th August 2001 I collapsed again at home. It was only my mother and I at home and she was very scared and called my grandparents and Dad. One image that will stay with me forever is of my Grandfather Peadar sitting beside me on a chair in my room crying his eyes out wailing "Why won't you tell us what's wrong with you?" The worrying thing was that none of us knew…..

Paudy with his Aunt Tricia and Uncle David.

My family couldn't take any more and immediately drove me to Crumlin Hospital with a referral letter from my GP. The last thing I remember leaving my house was my Nana Patsy helping me into the car (this will be important later). They did lots of tests and scans and rushed me to Beaumont Hospital at midnight by ambulance. After more tests and scans I was diagnosed as having a brain tumour in the pineal gland (over my right eye). It was the size of a golf ball. I remember being told "brain tumour" but not knowing what it was. I especially didn't know how serious it was or that it was cancer. I thought I would be back in school by late September. The hospital quickly set about removing some of the brain fluid which was causing the headaches as it was being blocked by the tumour. I later found out from my Dad that I would have died over the next day or two had they not removed the excess fluid. I had a ten hour operation to remove the tumour. There were complications during surgery. I had a stroke on the right side of my brain which left the entire left side of my body weakened and left me in a coma for fourteen weeks by which stage I was a “drooling, paralysed vegetable” in a wheelchair. After the coma I was in a vegetative state and was sent back to Crumlin for chemotherapy. I caught a bug which meant I had to return to Beaumont half-way through the treatment. Doctors were clear; if I survived I probably would remain in a vegetative state and almost certainly never walk again. At my worst I was given a survival rate of less than 1%. I had a total of eighteen operations on my head, spent nine months in a hospital bed as a vegetable (a parsnip as Jamie says, but was probably closer to a cabbage). I remember nothing of my time in Beaumont Hospital and only know this information from asking. I had my 16th birthday party in Beaumont Hospital.

In May 2002 I was discharged from Beaumont and admitted to Dun Laoighre National Rehabilitation Hospital as I couldn’t walk, talk or move etc. At this point although I was cancer free I was extremely soft in the head and was still being fed through a naso-gastric tube in my nose. The feed always made me sick which brought the tube back up and it wasn’t very nice getting it replaced. I spent a long hard ten months there in rehabilitation. I eventually went home for weekend visits every Friday afternoon and came back Sunday evenings. The ironic thing is my Nan was the first person to help me out of the car. As my physical injuries improved I was upgraded from a wheelchair to a walking frame. I remember taking my first unaided steps at home with my aunt, Trisha in November 2002 (I took eight). I was discharged in March 2003 just before my 17th birthday. I walked out those doors unaided that time.

I was forced to leave school the summer before my Junior Cert and my class had moved on in the system but I was slowly integrated back into it. I started it in September 2003 in third year and did my Junior Cert at 18 in a class of 15 year olds. I have to say that the entire school were very helpful and understanding of me. I stayed on at school after the Junior Cert.

In the meantime I joined CanTeen after spotting it while doing a random "cancer" search on the internet. But I didn't go to any

Paudy.

meetings because I was on a lot of medication at the time and wanted to forget my past. But when I went to my first meeting in “Carlingford” in 2005 I realised that this wasn’t just a club for “sick” people, but a family. A family I was being welcomed into with open arms. It was one of the best things I ever did. I love all the meetings and weekends away and we are all a really close knit group/family (even if there is the odd joke about my terrible accent and my Pidgin English nothing is meant by it).

I stayed at school for the leaving cert in which I got one of the highest marks in the year. I graduated in May 2006 and won the “Student of the Year Award”. This brought my story to the attention of the Local Media and some National Newspapers. I postponed my Mechanical Engineering place in DKIT and did Engineering PLC. In the meantime I was nominated for and subsequently won the “County Louth Person of the Year – 2006”.

I started college in 2007. Initially I enjoyed it and was top of my class but the stress of the twelve hour days of Honours Physics, Chemistry and Maths and other personal problems meant that my grades began to slip. I decided to leave in December 2007. At present I’m doing stand up comedy and I’ve gigged in Ireland and the UK and might break America next year, though knowing my luck I’ll probably just end up breaking a leg. I also do a set on my cancer experience “Cancer wasn’t all that bad! As a result of my chemotherapy I save a fortune on my electricity bills due to the fact I now glow in the dark.............”

I also hope to forge a career in motivational speaking like such greats as Nick Vujicic so that I may be able to help others who may be going through an illness or indeed just tough times…

I look upon my cancer experience as a positive one, although it caused family and friends great pain, personally I think it was good for me. Life is not about the destination it's the journey. I'm a lucky man and I see that now, although it has taken me seven years and almost two years in hospital to realise and come to terms with this. It has made me appreciate and respect family, friends and the little things in life more. My Granddad and I remain very close. He's my best friend and I love him to bits.

If we didn't have the hard times we wouldn't appreciate the good times as much. Surviving cancer is great once you have the right attitude. I don't know what life has in store for me but it will be fun finding out. I have really grown up and matured as a result. I'd like to say thank you to everyone who gave their help and support to both me and my family over the years.

Life's for a good time not a long time……….so enjoy it!

Ok so I'm officially finished with CanTeen now seeing as I celebrated my 25th birthday in March. It's been a memorable six-ish years and I've made some pals for life. I'll always cherish the friends, memories and craic I've had with you all. If our paths have crossed in that time thank you and enjoy the rest of your tenure as I'm sure when your swansong comes you'll look upon it with fond memories and great affection. So once again thank you all.

Paudy Byrne.

No Regrets

I'm not going to start with all the usual clichés ... was it fate ... there is light at the end of the tunnel, you're expecting all of that. Everyone’s experiences in life, even if they appear the same on the outside are all very unique to that individual. And that's the beauty of CanTeen, no one assumes we're all the same because here is where you can be yourself. You can be a teenager running amuck without the stress of thinking and dealing with issues far beyond your years.

It was 2002 and I was twelve years old when I first noticed the lump on my neck. I got the shock of my life and I can always remember my heart starting to pound in my chest and the blood rushing to my face with fear. I turned to my parents and trying to get the words out I said “What if it's cancer?' Their ironic reaction was to brush it off because of my age and assume it was a cyst or a swollen gland. I had experience of family members having cancer which they sadly died of, so in my mind cancer = death. I felt completely relieved at my parent’s reaction like any child would, believing that my parents knew the answer to everything.

A couple of weeks later I started to feel exhausted all of the time. I was losing weight and had a lot of throat infections. My Mam kept bringing me to my GP but he assumed it was a cyst due to my age as well. One night just after my thirteenth birthday I started to get terrible pains in my legs. I remember sitting in the kitchen crying my heart out with the pain and thinking something is just not right... I was admitted to Our Lady of Lourdes hospital in Drogheda that night and that's when the ball started rolling.

Over the week there I had various tests: x-rays, ultrasounds but I was pretty much kept in the dark. I was transferred to Our Lady's Hospital in Crumlin where I had a biopsy. The day after the operation was the most devastating day I have ever experienced in my life. Even thinking about it right now it feels like a dream. I was sitting there with my brother drinking that icky contrast for a CT scan when the ward sister, my Mam and Dad and two women I'd never met before came into the room. Well to say you could cut the

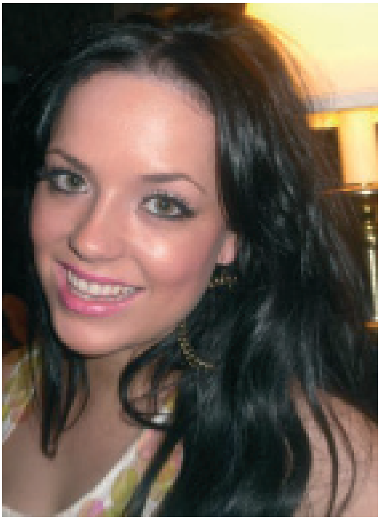
Rebecca and Sarah.

atmosphere with a knife is an understatement. The silence and everyone’s expressions said it all, I didn't need to hear a thing.

A tall woman wearing glasses sat down on my bed and looked me straight in the eye. This woman was my oncologist – Dr. O'Meara and she asked me did I have any idea what it could be. Feeling like my world was ending, the tears spilled out of my eyes like they were never going to end. I shook my head refusing to face the truth as my mind kept screaming cancer. That's when she said the seven dreaded words, the words that would change my life forever – “Did you ever hear of a tumour?” I began to hyperventilate believing that she was breaking the news that I was going to die. When she finally calmed me down she explained to me that my cancer was different to the types of cancer my family members had died from.

I began chemo the following week. Waiting for that day to come nearly killed me. I remember getting sick in the car with nerves on the way up for my first treatment. Walking onto the ward and seeing kids of two and three running around with drips and no hair seemed so surreal to me and made me feel so angry. I went through all the emotions – fear, rage and finally acceptance. It took me a long while to accept that I had cancer and that bad things do happen to good people but I am a strong believer that some things happen for a reason.

The chemo was agonising; within half an hour of my first treatment I was sick. Waking up vomiting and in pain became so normal for me. It was rare for me to feel well and when I did I'd be knocked back down again with the next treatment. Out of



Sarah.

everything losing my hair was the easiest thing I had to face. My auntie cut my hair (which was down to my hip) into a bob before I started chemo. How I looked didn't matter to me, my health was my main focus and I felt so guilty for taking it for granted before all of this.

One of the worst days of my life was Christmas Day in 2002. I was in my local hospital with the vomiting bug but I was allowed to go home that day. When I got home and saw all of my presents I felt nothing but depressed. I didn't open a single one. I just lay on the sofa all day crying. I felt like I didn't even want to get better, I just wanted to die. I had seen such a horrible side to life that I didn't feel like living anymore because I was so scared of what else could happen to me in life.

I finished with the hospital in March and had my 'Freddie' taken out in April which I was very sad about because he had become a part of me! But it did feel amazing to have a shower after it was gone! The day I left the hospital was one of the best and worst days of my life. On one hand I was relieved to be finished with the hospital, but on the other hand I was terrified to face the real world after everything because I felt so protected and sheltered on St. John’s Ward. The months and years that followed were very difficult. I was completely paranoid about relapsing and would wake up every morning and check my entire body for any lumps or bumps. I had panic attacks for years and would come out in stress rashes all of the time. I found school difficult because I lacked confidence after everything and hated being known as 'the sick girl'. While all my friends worried about boys I worried about colds thinking that it was a sign it was back.

Throughout all this time CanTeen and my family were my rock. I lived for the weekends away where I could feel normal and forget about all my worries. I'd like to take his opportunity to thank everyone who cared for me in hospital especially Dr. O'Meara who treated me like an adult and was always honest with me. My Mam, Dad and brother were amazing through it all. They went through everything I did and for that I am eternally grateful (Love you guys!!). I have made friends for life here in CanTeen and would encourage anyone thinking of joining, TO JOIN it will change your life forever!

I am now nearly 22 years old and am almost a qualified nurse, just waiting for my registration to come through. After all my experiences with hospitals you'd think I'd run a mile! But strangely it feels very right for me. If I make a difference in even one of my patients' lives then that's good enough for me! Looking back now I would never take back anything I went through. I really believe its put me on the right path in life and has made me the person I am today.

Now to end with a big fat cliche (I know I said I wouldn't but I’m feeling pretty inspired right now and I can't resist!) You are unique, no one can replace you...always remember that.

Sarah Byrne.

Sarah Roche

Hope, Faith, Strength and Courage

It all started in the summer of 2007. I was diagnosed with an Osteosarcoma (a bone tumour) when I was just 12 years old. I first noticed something was wrong when I was away on holidays with my family in Orlando, Florida in June 2007. I was just walking as normal, enjoying the sunshine, loving being off school and in my favourite place in the world, when I suddenly got a sharp pain in my left knee. Mum thought it might have been from not wearing proper shoes as I had been wearing a lot of flip flops and sandals, or that I might have twisted it in some way.

The pain would come and go every few days and as the weeks went on, it became more painful. I started to gain a limp, so Mum and Dad knew that there was something wrong at that point. I went to my GP in Beaumont and he couldn't quite see what was wrong but had his own suspicions and sent me off for an x-ray. The very next day my GP phoned Mum to say that something had shown on the x-ray, and to go to Temple Street Hospital for further tests. After many x-rays, MRI scans, and a biopsy in Cappagh Hospital, I was diagnosed with an Osteosarcoma on 23rd July 2007. I was admitted to St. John's Ward in Crumlin Hospital to have my 'Freddie' (Hickman line) put in on 26th July 2007 and had my first chemotherapy on 27th July 2007. It was the worst day of my life –

getting told I would have to go through treatment that would make me really sick, make me lose my hair, and not enjoy my summer like everyone else. At 12 years of age I thought only old people could get cancer, because they were the only people I had ever heard of having it.

From then on, everything happened really quickly: diagnosis, chemotherapy, my hair falling out and finally surgery on my 13th birthday in Cappagh Hospital to remove my tumour. Just before my surgery, in October 2007, I met a girl called Ciara Conroy in St. John's Ward, who also had an Osteosarcoma. She had just had her surgery and reassured me it was nothing to worry about. We were in the same room together and became very close friends very

Sarah with Colin Farrell.

quickly. We got along so well together and found each treatment easier because we both knew how each other felt. My tumour was replaced with a titanium plate and knee replacement but funnily enough it turned out to be one of the best birthday presents I could ever have. Knowing that my cancer was gone and I was finally on the road to recovery, I was the happiest girl in the world.

I spent Christmas day 2007 in hospital. I thought it was going to be the worst Christmas ever but in fact it turned out to be one of the most memorable. All of my family spent the day with me in the hospital. The nurses on the ward gave me a Nintendo Wii and the best present of all was when Colin Farrell dropped in to say hello!!!!

After surgery my leg was in a brace for fourteen weeks. When this was finally removed, I had extensive physiotherapy in both Crumlin and Cappagh. It was very hard work but at last I was beginning to feel like things were getting back to normal. I had only four months of chemotherapy left and then I would be finished! It wasn't too bad being in hospital after my surgery, because I had a friend who knew exactly how I was feeling and what I was going through – we even seemed to have our treatments at the same time each week!!! Sadly in May 2010, after a very courageous battle, my best friend Ciara passed away.

I made so many friends from being in St. John's Ward and got to know them better each time I was in, right up until my final chemotherapy on 27th March 2008.

I truly couldn't have a better life now since having cancer, as I

Ciara and Sarah.

made so many fantastic friends throughout my journey, especially my best friend Ciara. When I was well enough after my treatment, I joined CanTeen. This was the best decision I ever made. CanTeen is an amazing support group and I honestly can't imagine my life without it. I have made so many life-long friends with CanTeen and have so many memories both past and lots more to come in the future to remember for the rest of my life.

Sarah Roche.

Shauna Fitzpatrick

A long boat ride to Crumlin

I was diagnosed with Malignant Melanoma in November 2009.

I was 13 years old and barely knew the meaning of the word cancer never mind 'malignant melanoma' but it was not long till Cancer and everything about it was going to be part of my day-to-day lifestyle.

Melanoma is Skin Cancer. I was the first child on St. John’s Ward with melanoma and with my type of melanoma. I didn’t have chemo I had a treatment called ‘Interferon’ which was new for me and everyone on the ward!

It all started with a simple lump on the back of my neck (Skin Cancer is usually a mark on the skin not a lump or it can be found on the eye). I got it removed because it had no real reason to be there in the first place. Getting it removed was not pretty; hearing the doctor say ‘these scissors are not sharp enough’ wasn’t the nicest thing in the world. I got it removed on the 1st of September 2009 – my first day back at school. It was going to be the first day of a lot that I was going to miss! Shortly after getting it removed the results were in – it was cancer. I didn’t know that for quite a while though so I continued living life as normal, completely forgetting about everything that was going on from doctors visits, to scans – cancer just never came to mind.

Shauna and her Mum, Ann.

I spent my first day in hospital watching ‘Home & Away’ with my brother. I was so nervous because I really didn’t know what was ahead of me, I really had no idea. I didn’t know that the girl I was sharing a room with on the first night was going to end up being one of my greatest friends or that I would end up sharing a room with her for most of my time in hospital. Although we may have hated each other in hospital things sure have changed now!

It wasn’t long till I had my ‘Freddie’ put in and we were being taught all you need to know! ‘Freddie’ was so handy, although some days he didn’t work correctly. There was one day where I had my head lowered and my legs in the air on the bed to try and get some blood; it was all fun and games. My days in hospital were getting boring. Thankfully my treatment didn’t cause major side effects like I didn’t lose my hair or anything. I always had a little audience while getting treatment as it was new to all of the staff. While getting treatment I was always quite sick and tired. I needed a wheelchair for that super long corridor down to St. John's. My parents really enjoyed the wheelchair – some days my Dad would run down the corridor at speed just for fun. Or another day my Mom actually ran over a man's toes with the wheelchair since they weren't very used to it, but they improved with time, luckily for me. I spent a lot of time chatting to the nurses telling each other about our weekend because I didn't really have anything else to do but I loved it. It made my time in hospital more enjoyable! Although I didn't really enjoy my hospital experience all that much, while it was happening, I definitely missed it when I went home and I make sure I visit the ward every time I head to Crumlin!

I stayed in Dublin for about two months going in and out of Crumlin each day because I couldn't go home… I think that was one of the hardest parts of it all – being away from home for so long. After that two months I got to go home for Christmas and my treatment came with me. My treatment went on for a year and a half in total, taking tablets and getting an injection once a week when I went home. Interferon – the treatment I was on – was known for its side effects, and I ended up being affected by them.

Headaches was the main side effect and by golly did I get headaches. Actually the side effects continued after treatment and I still suffer from them to this day. No Doctor could find a reason for them! I am on different types of medication for them now! But I'm finished treatment and thankfully in remission! I must admit, I

Shauna.

didn't realise it at the time – but cancer was one of the best things that happened to me! It helped me to grow as a person and has given me so many new and different experiences! It has introduced me to places like 'Barretstown' and 'CanTeen' where I have the best fun and great friends.

As of September 2011, I have been rediagnosed, and I know I have another battle ahead of me. But now I know all of the great things that are in my life, thanks to it.

Shauna Fitzpatrick.

My Cancer Diagnosis - a relief!?!

Everyone's cancer story is unique and mine is no different. Although it may seem strange my diagnosis with Hodgkins Lymphoma in May 2002 was almost a relief.

Two years earlier I had noticed that my toes were getting rather itchy and my Mum got me some powder for athlete's foot. Little did I know that these were actually the start of symptoms for something much more serious. Gradually the itch spread up my legs and all over my body. Oddly it was always much worse at night time and I also started to show signs of insomnia despite becoming more and more tired. My Mum took me on several visits to my GP who treated

Susan.

me for different skin conditions but to no avail, and he referred me to a dermatologist. They tried different treatments but then sent me home saying they couldn’t find anything wrong.

In September 2001 I started at The Sacred Heart Grammar School in Newry. Mostly the school was very accommodating especially one teacher in particular – Mrs Daley, my year head. I gradually was missing more and more school starting to go in a 10:30 and then 12:00 if I could. I was losing a lot of weight and had no appetite. As time went on the itch grew worse. I would lie in bed and scratch all night until eventually I would fall asleep in the early hours of the morning at maybe 6 or 7 o’clock. Many people thought that maybe I wasn’t fit for the school I was at.

I started having night sweats but at twelve years old I didn’t realise their significance and never passed any remarks. I was so tired and had no energy that I couldn’t do much exercise. I became breathless easily and I started to get a cough which wouldn’t go away and lasted for over six months. I would take panic attacks in school over the smallest thing. I also started getting pains in my chest at times. I felt that there was so much wrong with me and my Mum was worried enough about me that I didn’t say anything, not realising that everything could have been related. Mum kept taking me back to my GP but when, eventually he said maybe it was psychological and I should go and see a psychiatrist, thankfully my Mum disagreed and we changed to a new GP.

My Mum I have to say was my rock through the whole thing. She never gave up. She kept taking me to specialists up and down the

Orlaith, Susie, Amy and Lisa.

country from Belfast to Dublin and even over to Scotland on one occasion. Changing GP was, I feel, what saved my life. He referred me to a paediatrician who admitted me to hospital for observation and a few tests. On my last day when I was about to be discharged I remember the doctors and nurses on the ward round gathering around the bottom of my bed again saying that they couldn't find anything and that I should try and get up and go to school at the usual time with all of my friends. Then just as they were summarising my case to each other the doctor asked me how long I had had my cough for and my Mum told them that I'd had it about six months. Dr Aljard, my paediatrician said he would take a chest x-ray just to 'complete the picture'. I went down for the x-ray and afterward wondered why all of the people in the next room where crowding around my x-ray film but never really thought any more about it. I was discharged that afternoon – a Monday I think and on Thursday Mum got a phone call and took me out of school to go back up to the local hospital. It turned out that they had found what was wrong; the x-ray had shown a large mass in my chest. It was pressing on my lungs and heart. No wonder I was breathless, had a cough and chest pains.

The next day I was in the Haematology Unit in The Royal Hospital for Sick Children in Belfast under the care of Dr McCarthy. I was told I had stage four Hodgkin’s Lymphoma and I would have to undergo chemotherapy. Initially I didn’t really understand and my biggest concern was when I would be able to take part in PE again. Although having a cancer diagnosis is always difficult, for my Mum and I at last we knew what was wrong and we could work towards getting better.

I had a central line inserted, which was great as I was terrified of needles and underwent eight months of chemo. I was treated mostly as an out-patient and treatments alternated between one month of mostly oral medication and one month of IV medication. I responded very well and most of the other kids on chemo in the hospital at the time I feel, went through a much tougher time than I did. My bloods were usually good and I never needed a transfusion, and I never was admitted with an infection. Having been so symptomatic before my diagnosis I feel that the side effects of the chemo were easier to deal with. Also psychologically I knew that I was on the road to recovery. I lost my hair which I didn't really mind, but with the steroids I was on I gained a lot of weight and within six months I had doubled my body weight. I found this very difficult to cope with. The care I received in the Royal was second to none and I wish to thank all the Nurses and Doctors who looked after me in the haematology unit.

Though my cancer experience I lost some things, my hair, a year at school and even a few good friends but I feel I gained so much more. (Well I gained a lot of weight) but I gained new friends. I went to a world oncology camp in Michigan. I went to Barretstown and met a wonderful friend Lisa Parker who encouraged me to join CanTeen. Despite being from the North, Evelyn was very nice and let me join. Although I had been a few years finished treatment when I joined CanTeen, I found it very helpful. With my appearance and my weight having changed greatly, I had lost some confidence which CanTeen, I feel, helped me regain by becoming friends with people who knew what it was like. It is also fantastic that you can bring a friend or sibling along too as CanTeen meetings are always great fun and your cancer diagnosis can affect them too.

There is no doubt that having cancer impacts upon your life at the time and also for a long time afterwards. I feel my experience has guided my career choice and I am now entering my third year of medicine. I hope that having knowledge of what it can be like as a patient will help make me a more empathic and understanding doctor.

Finally I want to thank my Mummy, Daddy, Gemma and everyone who helped my road to recovery and also to Evelyn, all the CanTeen leaders and last but definitely not least to all the members who have made my time in CanTeen so much fun and memorable. I leave you now with a photo of when I was a few months into treatment and one before a recent night out with a few CanTeen friends.

Goodbye and Good luck.

Susie Cull.

Thomas Feeney

My trip to Oak Ward

Hi, my name is Thomas Feeney and I am 14 years old. In December 1999, I was diagnosed with Acute Lymphoblastic Leukaemia – A.L.L. I was 3 years old. It first started off when I got pains in my legs and my Mam brought me to Temple Street Hospital, where they took x-rays and blood tests. The doctors eventually told my Mam something was wrong and they sent us to Tallaght Hospital to be admitted. This gave my family a scare. After a number of days and loads of more tests, my parents were told I had A.L.L. and would need chemotherapy treatment for the next three years. So for the first six weeks I had to stay in hospital and I couldn't leave. My Dad, Mam and Vincent stayed in hospital on Christmas Eve so Santa came to us in hospital that year! I can remember people used to visit me all the time with presents and toys for myself and my twin brother, Vincent. We were delighted we had so many toys! So, Oak ward was my second home for the next three years as I kept getting viruses and infections.

It wasn't all that bad being in hospital. My aunts, uncles and cousins came to visit me all the time, with presents of course! My Mam stayed with me every day I was there. Dad used to come in to stay at the weekends. My Mam had to sleep on those bad camp beds which really irritated her because she had back pains but she ignored them for me and today I am so grateful for that. I made loads of friends, some I am still very close to, today. There was a playroom that Marie and Catherine looked after. It had play stations, a big ball pool and loads more toys, and we always made play dough. I also met loads of famous people like Robbie Keane, Brian O'Driscoll and Denis Hickey. I have to say the food was…. not the best! I lived on omelettes and Lucozade! The worst thing about being in the hospital was the amount of needles! I'd say I got over a 'thousand' needles in my arm while I was there!

I remember the times I had to fast for hours before going into theatre. I always asked why I had to fast. My Mam said because you'd get sick if you ate and the medicine they're giving you will

Vincent, Thomas and Santa.

help you. The doctors and nurses once said “ if you have any loose teeth we’ll take them out and the tooth fairy will give you money when you wake up”, and just before I went into the theatre I would always check to see if I had any loose teeth! I did get a few £5 notes from the tooth fairy!

I finished my treatment in March 2003. This meant I was cured from cancer but they told my parents that that I would have to come back for check-ups. Eventually they went to yearly and last year they told us I didn’t have to come back.

During my treatment I went to Barretstown on family camps, and then I went on ten day camps on my own when I was eight. Vincent also went on sibling camps for ten days. Barretstown is a place where children from all over Europe and Ireland who have cancer and other life threatening illnesses come to have fun for ten days. This was a great experience for me and I was glad I could go. I made loads of friends and had great fun.

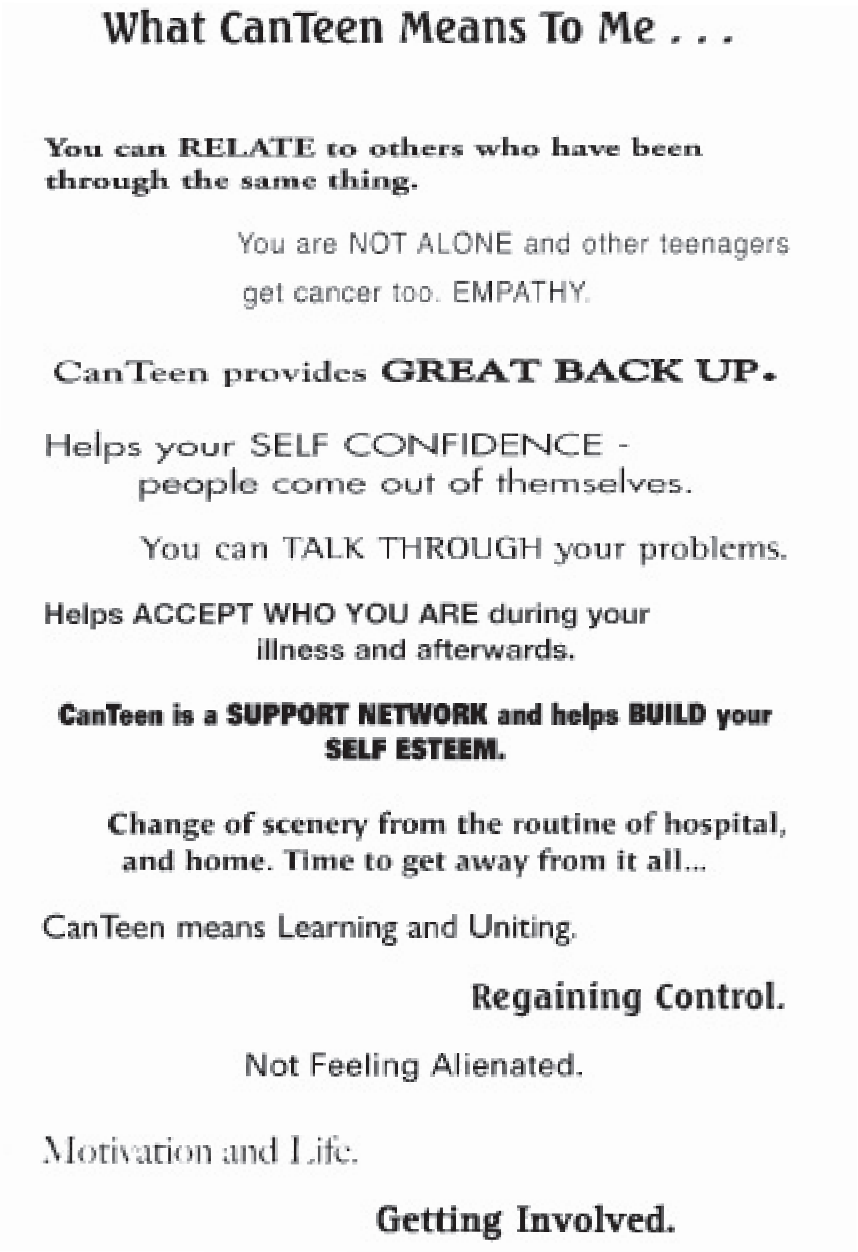
I was also contacted by the “Make-A-Wish Foundation”. This organisation gave me one wish that would let me do anything. My wish was to see “Mickey Mouse” in Disneyland, Florida! This was a brilliant holiday for me and my family. We were there for our 7th birthday.

Then one of my friends from the hospital who I hadn’t seen in years contacted me through Facebook and told me about this group called CanTeen. CanTeen brought people together who had one thing in common, they have or have had cancer. This group was for people between the age of 12 and 25 years. They bring members and

Thomas.

their friends on weekends away, day trips and abroad to conferences. It sounded deadly, a place where people made new friends and could hang out. My friend gave me the details and I joined. I was a bit nervous going on my first weekend away but I had two friends joining at the same time. The people there were very nice and friendly. It helped me see what other cancers people go through. Now I have made a whole load of new friends who are the best in the world!

Thomas Feeney.



What CanTeen Means To Me . . .

You can RELATE to others who have been through the same thing.

You are NOT ALONE and other teenagers get cancer too. EMPATHY.

CanTeen provides **GREAT BACK UP.**

Helps your SELF CONFIDENCE - people come out of themselves.

You can TALK THROUGH your problems.

Helps ACCEPT WHO YOU ARE during your illness and afterwards.

CanTeen is a SUPPORT NETWORK and helps BUILD your SELF ESTEEM.

Change of scenery from the routine of hospital, and home. Time to get away from it all...

CanTeen means Learning and Uniting.

Regaining Control.

Not Feeling Alienated.

Motivation and Life.

Getting Involved.

SUPPORT

NEW FRIENDS

FUN

ACTIVITIES

GREAT CRAIC!!!

A LAUGH AND A HALF...

A BREAK FROM THE REAL WORLD

CHILL OUT

RELAX

SPECIAL BONDS

CHAT

LATE NIGHTS...

CANTEEN DISCOS!

PIZZA

CanTeen Ireland is a nationwide support group for young people between the ages of 12 and 25 who have or have had cancer.

Our primary goal is to help support, empower and develop young people with cancer, through peer support, group meetings and actvity weekends away.

CanTeen Ireland
Carmichael Centre
North Brunswick Street, Dublin 7

Telephone: 01 872 2012
Email: info@canteen.ie
Website: www.canteen.ie

Charity No.11597

We can also be contacted through
The Irish Cancer Society,
43/45 Northumberland Road,
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Tel: 01 231 0500