

Drink Up!

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*“When fate hands you a lemon, make lemonade.”*

Most people have heard Dale Carnegie’s optimistic quote, but for me, it is a life motto. When considered independently, lemons, water, ice, and sugar are fairly humdrum. However, mix all the ingredients together and they produce a cold, refreshing drink called lemonade. A sour lemon that I was handed taught me a lesson that will nourish my mind and sustain my soul for the rest of my life.

Lemon provides the acidic foundation required for lemonade, a tangy and satisfying beverage. It also symbolizes the foul fruit that took root in my lower back. Yellow is the color of lemons, the color that implies cowardice, and the color of the cancer awareness ribbon associated with synovial sarcoma. The diagnosis could have turned me into a frightened and bitter coward; on the contrary, I became strong and fiercely determined to put an end to the disease that affects so many. The sour actually gave me power to help find a cure.

Water is an essential ingredient for lemonade and for life. My family poured out buckets of love, which kept me strong and focused. My cup was overflowing with encouragement from teachers, and friends drenched me in support. My feelings of despair were doused by the constant show of affection. I felt a downpouring of God’s love, and I knew that I needed to trust Him to steer my life along a new and unexpected course. Faith sustained me when I felt I was drowning from fear and pain.

Ice represents the cold, hard facts I was forced to face. Before the diagnosis, I dreamed of competing in the Olympics in trampoline and becoming a United States Air Force fighter pilot.

Those aspirations were frozen then shattered. A large section of muscle was removed from my back, and a skin graft was performed. After the surgery, I faced the fact that my earlier dreams were unattainable. I did not waste time feeling sorry for myself and set new goals. The frost that threatened to impede my purpose began to melt away. I warmed up to the idea of becoming a pediatric oncologist; therefore, I started researching and competing in science fairs. For two summers, I learned from researchers in cancer laboratories at the University of Kentucky, and I am currently interning with bone marrow researchers at Cincinnati Children's Hospital and Medical Center. I chased away the chill by getting fired up and building a new plan for my future.

Sugar signifies the sweet parts of life. Before cancer, gymnastics brought me fulfillment and enjoyment. I believed I would never tumble again because of my new physical limitations. How sweet was the day when I returned to the gym and performed four back handsprings in a row! It just took a spoonful of delicious tumbling to make the misery go down. Although I no longer had the precision needed to tumble at a competitive level, I was able to join a co-ed cheer team and instruct other athletes. I coached a youth cheer team and a special needs cheer team. It was incredible to see that the special needs athletes loved tumbling as much as I did. I was able to share my skills and discovered a new passion for coaching in the process. It was satisfying to see the athletes making the best out of their situations and giving their all. I embraced the fact that my life was not limited. I could handle anything as long as I had a bit of sweetness to counteract the bitterness.

Synovial sarcoma is a lemon that I was handed. Cancer is not a battle where I have to arm myself and fight. I am not a hero just because doctors had to cut out rogue cells that were spreading throughout my body. Cancer was just a single ingredient that was stirred into my life. I

did not let it consume me. My battle was actually about transforming a horrendous flavor into a tasty indulgence. My cup is full of determination and spilling over with love.

Cancer is a rotten fruit, and I have resolved to squeeze out every drop of sour juice. I will pour in life's essential ingredients. I will throw in a chunk of cold reality. Finally, I will sprinkle a bit of sugar on top and take a giant swig. Cancer has not been a curse but a deliciously cool drink that has redirected my life and set me on a new path full of hope and promise.

Drink up!