

# When the PATIENTS Become the DOCTORS

BY EM DEMARCO



## XENIA CATALINA FERNANDEZ

AGE 26, OF PAWTUCKET, R.I.; CLASS OF 2018; PLANS TO GO INTO PEDIATRICS

**DIAGNOSIS DATE:** FEB. 11, 2004, AGE 13, ACUTE LYMPHOCYTIC LEUKEMIA (ALL)

**TREATMENT SUMMARY:** ABOUT 2-1/2 YEARS TOTAL. FIRST MONTH INDUCTION, THEN CONSOLIDATION, THEN MAINTENANCE; FINISHED MAY 2006.



## MATTHEW KOCHER

AGE 22, OF OAKDALE, PA.; CLASS OF 2019; PLANS TO GO INTO PEDIATRICS

**DIAGNOSIS DATE:** MARCH 1, 2005, AGE 11, ACUTE MYELOID LEUKEMIA (AML)

**TREATMENT SUMMARY:** THREE HEAVY ROUNDS OF CHEMO, THEN A BONE MARROW TRANSPLANT; BEGAN IN MARCH AND FINISHED AUGUST 2005.



XENIA AND MATTHEW SHARED MEMORIES OF THINGS THAT HELPED THEM GET THROUGH TREATMENT -- INCLUDING SUPPORT FROM FAMILY, HOURS OF TV, PLAYING VIDEO GAMES WITH FRIENDS IN THE HOSPITAL ...

MATTHEW'S FAMILY KNEW HE LIKED **GETTING MAIL** -- IN THE HOSPITAL, HE RECEIVED 25 CARDS A DAY FROM FAMILY, FRIENDS, AND COMPLETE STRANGERS FROM ALL AROUND THE WORLD.

I STILL HAVE THEM. THEY'RE IN A BIN UNDER MY BED.



"MY MOM WAS PRETTY MUCH MY ROCK," XENIA SAYS. AT ONE POINT, XENIA WAS CRAVING **RAVIOLI** MORNING, NOON, AND NIGHT FOR ALMOST AN ENTIRE MONTH. SO HER MOM KEPT THE FREEZER STOCKED WITH IT.

I DIDN'T EAT [RAVIOLI] FOR THREE YEARS, I WAS SO TIRED OF IT!





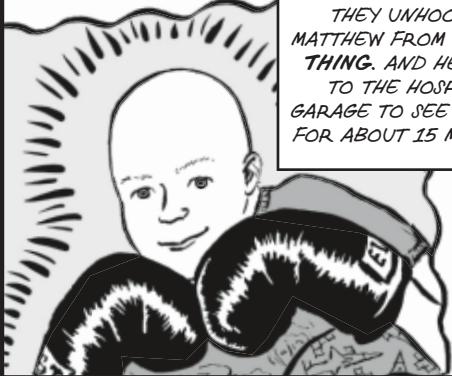
"ONE OF THE DARKEST POINTS ... I TOLD THE DOCTORS ALL I WANTED TO DO WAS SEE MY BEST FRIEND. AND THEY'RE LIKE, 'BRING HIM IN!' I SAID, 'BUT YOU DON'T UNDERSTAND -- IT'S A FOUR-LEGGED ANIMAL.'"

A FEW DAYS LATER, THEY UNHOOKED MATTHEW FROM EVERYTHING. AND HE WENT TO THE HOSPITAL GARAGE TO SEE HIS DOG FOR ABOUT 15 MINUTES.



"TEN DAYS LATER, I WAS HOME. IT WAS A TURNING POINT FOR ME."

MATTHEW, DURING TREATMENT. A FAMILY FRIEND AND CANCER SURVIVOR GAVE HIM THESE BOXING GLOVES.



AS PATIENTS, WHAT SURPRISED YOU?

"I HAD NO CLUE WHAT I WAS GETTING INTO ... [THE CLINIC] WAS SUPER COLORFUL ... IT WAS NICE BECAUSE, YEAH, YOU'RE SICK, BUT YOU'RE STILL A KID, AND THEY STILL WANT YOU TO HAVE FUN."

"EVERY TIME I WALKED IN ... I WOULD SEE THE RECEPTIONIST [AND SAY], 'I'M HERE!'"

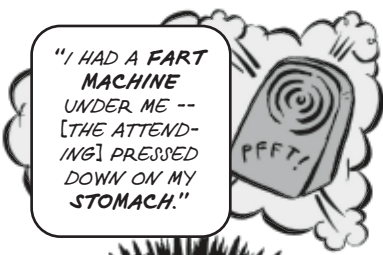
XENIA, DURING TREATMENT. ONE OF HER DOCTORS CALLED HER BROOKLYN, BECAUSE SHE OFTEN WORE THIS SHIRT TO CLINIC.



SO, IT SOUNDS LIKE HUMOR WAS A COPING MECHANISM?



ONE TIME ... I BELIEVE HE WAS THE HEAD OF THE ONCOLOGY DEPARTMENT ... THE RESIDENTS ALL KNEW I WAS GOING TO PULL A PRANK.



"I HAD A FART MACHINE UNDER ME -- [THE ATTENDING] PRESSED DOWN ON MY STOMACH."



YOU PRANKED THE ATTENDING? THAT IS EPIC!



"MY DAD HAD THE BUTTON, SO HE PRESSED IT AND IT WENT OFF."



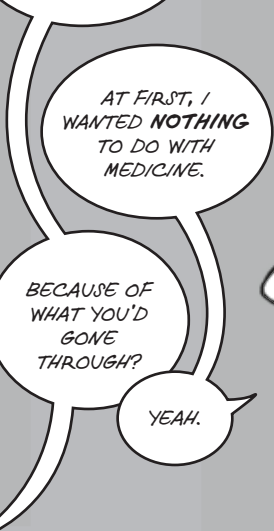
I LAID IN BED AND WENT, "OH, I'VE GOT THIS PAIN IN MY BELLY!"



"[THE ATTENDING] JERKED BACK ... ALL THE RESIDENTS WERE BUSTING UP LAUGHING!"

WHEN DID YOU DECIDE TO BECOME DOCTORS?

IN HIGH SCHOOL, HE SHADOWED A RESEARCHER AT HILLMAN CANCER CENTER. BUT MATTHEW DECIDED WORKING AT A RESEARCH BENCH WASN'T FOR HIM.



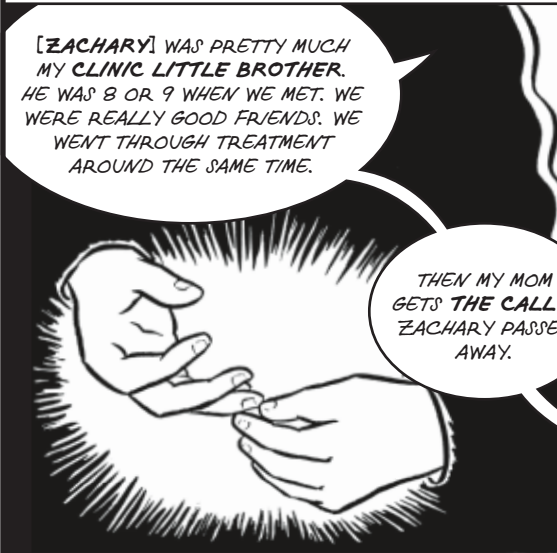
AT FIRST, I WANTED NOTHING TO DO WITH MEDICINE.

BECAUSE OF WHAT YOU'D GONE THROUGH?

YEAH.

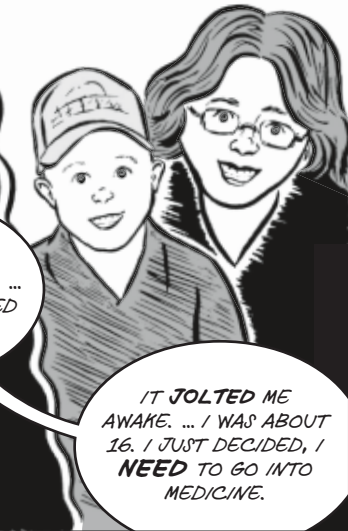
"I WANTED TO ACTUALLY BE THERE AT THE BED, SEEING THE PATIENTS, TELLING THEM IT'S GOING TO BE OKAY."

XENIA SAYS SHE HAD TO UNDERSTAND HER TREATMENT BECAUSE ENGLISH WASN'T HER MOM'S FIRST LANGUAGE. HER DOCTORS TOLD HER SHE SHOULD CONSIDER A MEDICAL CAREER, SHE SAYS. BUT THAT WASN'T ON HER MIND UNTIL LATER.



[ZACHARY] WAS PRETTY MUCH MY CLINIC LITTLE BROTHER. HE WAS 8 OR 9 WHEN WE MET. WE WERE REALLY GOOD FRIENDS. WE WENT THROUGH TREATMENT AROUND THE SAME TIME.

THEN MY MOM GETS THE CALL ... ZACHARY PASSED AWAY.



IT JOLTED ME AWAKE. ... I WAS ABOUT 16. I JUST DECIDED, I NEED TO GO INTO MEDICINE.

ANY FINAL THOUGHTS YOU WANT TO SHARE WITH READERS?

WE GET THE DIAGNOSIS, WE GET TREATED, AND -- IF WE END UP BEING IN THE LUCKY GROUP -- WE SURVIVE. BUT IT'S NOT LIKE THAT'S THE END. ... WE HAVE TO KEEP A LOOKOUT FOR OUR HEALTH.

THE END OF TREATMENT IS NOT REALLY THE END. IT'S MORE LIKE THE BEGINNING OF SURVIVORSHIP.

