BRIANA: Wise Beyond Her Years

Briana talks more like a seasoned life coach than the 16-year-old Sussex county girl she is.

“You will get through this. You will survive,” Briana told herself when she was struggling with her cancer diagnosis. “Life won’t give you something you can never take.” This wisdom has helped her through her ordeal, along with her family, parents and five older siblings.

Briana was diagnosed with Stage 3 Hodgkins Lymphoma when she was 12. Almost three years to the day, when she was 15, Briana found out she had relapsed, but this time it was Stage 4B. Her treatment regimen was difficult, changing frequently from inpatient to outpatient chemotherapy, and then a stem cell transplant which required isolation for 45 days. Briana said that was the hardest. She missed over 110 days of school, which is no fun for someone who enjoys school. “I love my school events, the teachers, the structure, and learning,” she says.

The Emmanuel Cancer Foundation provided Briana and her family with emotional support through in person visits from their caseworker Caitlin. To alleviate some of their financial stress, we also delivered monthly groceries, helped pay to fill their oil tank last winter, and assisted with car payments. “I was happy [ECF was] there for my family through this terrible time,” said Briana. “It’s comforting to know that if I ever need anything or to talk, someone is always there.”

Briana tries to feel as “normal” as possible. “You think that when you get [well] you’ll finally be like everyone else again, but you get hit with the realization that you aren’t and you might never be again, and you can’t ever go back to who you were before the cancer.” But Briana stays positive and focuses on her many interests. She loves photography, reading, writing, any kind of music, and is “very crafty.” Her favorite movie is The Breakfast Club, which she has seen 200 times! Briana volunteers as much as she can and aspires to study either law or psychology. “I just want to help people,” she says.

Briana’s self-reflection and thoughtfulness about her experiences with cancer are truly inspirational. “When it starts to set in what’s going on and when treatment is rough, you will love to imagine yourself being in a different place,” says Briana. “You will want to change things and arrange it like your own puzzle. Easily solved and built in just one second. Things will be hard and the waves will be stronger.

You’ll wish that you don’t have to face it. You’ll try to turn around and run away. But you’ll realize that you cannot escape this, that for you to get through it, you’ll need to lift yourself just to fight it. And when that day comes, you’ll have all the courage you’ve been hiding in your heart. You’ll find out how brave you are. You’ll know that you are capable of more.”
“You gain strength, courage, and confidence by every experience in which you really stop to look fear in the face. You must do the thing you think you cannot do.”

– ELEANOR ROOSEVELT

Growing up, I always thought we would learn how to be brave once we became adults. And that as grown-ups we would know how to handle the challenges that life would surely throw our way. But working at ECF has shown me otherwise. I have come to learn that the children we help, so young and new to the world, are truly the fearless, wise ones. They manage the cruel hand they have been dealt with astounding courage and dignity, fighting fiercely and loving greatly. They face their mortality head on, and they accept the treatments they have to endure, and more often than not they do it with a smile. They have shown me what bravery truly looks like.

JOANN PASSANTINO

As months passed, Jizaiah felt better and was finally able to return home in the spring of 2017. He went back to doing many of his normal kid activities, including enjoying a family trip to Florida that summer. Jizaiah returned to school in September and plans were underway to remove his feeding tube & port. ECF arranged for Jizaiah and his parents and a sibling to see “Annie” at the Papermill Playhouse in December.

However, in January 2018, Jizaiah relapsed a second time. He was re-admitted to the hospital for a new and cutting edge therapy, Car-T cell, with the goal of hopefully getting his immune system to fight the cancer. Jizaiah is one of the first pediatric patients in NJ to receive this treatment. He spent several months in the hospital, his mother again staying with him, recovering from the treatment as well as troublesome kidney and gastric issues that needed to be overcome before he was finally able to return home. Just one week after leaving the hospital, Jizaiah’s lung collapsed and he was readmitted. Two bouts of pneumonia caused him to remain in the hospital for most of the summer. When he returned in August, he still needed round the clock oxygen and a feeding tube.

Currently, Jizaiah is recovering at home and will be homeschooled for the rest of the year. Fortunately, his bone marrow has responded well to the new treatment, and there are no signs of leukemia. He is now being slowly weaned off his feeding tube, and a Pulmonary Specialist will monitor him closely and eventually get him off oxygen. Jizaiah is happy to be home watching his favorite wrestlers and likes his homeschool teacher. Both Jizaiah and his parents have remained amazingly positive despite their harrowing experiences.
THE LIONS CLUB

“Volunteers are not paid—not because they are worthless, but because they are priceless.”

The Emmanuel Cancer Foundation loves the Lions Club. For many years, they have been helping ECF across New Jersey. In our Southern Region, the local Lions Club chose ECF as its District Service Project for 2018-2019. The shelves of the food pantry there are now fully stocked thanks to the Lions Club. We spoke with Lion Jack Romano (Lions Club State Advisor, Multiple District 16, 2018-2019) about the Club’s involvement.

Q. How did you and the Lions Club get involved with helping ECF?

A. The Midland Park Lions Club has been actively supporting the Emmanuel Cancer Foundation for many years, both financially and stocking the food pantry. The ECF Northern Office and our club meeting place are neighbors! Over the years we have had ECF staff address our club at regular meetings. ECF Executive Director Joann Passantino recently spoke at a meeting, and the Lions were so impressed with the work ECF continues to do that other districts and clubs have scheduled speakers from ECF too. In fact, at the recent District 16-L Reorganization meeting, Lion Terry DeSantis spoke and collected food to restock the food bank for the Southern office, launching our involvement there. (Shown in photo below.)

Q. How has this involvement affected you and other members?

A. You do not realize how a disease such as cancer can affect not only a child, which is devastating enough, but also their families who are trying to cope with the disease, their child’s welfare, dealing with insurance companies, hospitals, doctor’s offices and the like. We never realize or think that cancer can strike anyone at any age. Lions International recently added childhood cancer as one of its five core issues (in addition to vision, hunger, diabetes awareness and environmental concerns). With this, and the work ECF has done and continues to do, this was a perfect match for both groups. Not many Lions were aware that ECF even existed. Both our groups have something in common—we are the best kept secrets in New Jersey but are very effective on what we both do for our communities.

JACK POILLON

“Volunteers don’t necessarily have the time; they just have the heart.”

ECF volunteer Jack Poillon comes from a family that believes in helping others and giving back. His mom, Janet, and dad, Pete, have been volunteering for ECF Senior Regional Director Barbara Kopel for over 15 years doing anything ECF needs, including delivering food to families. His sister Mary also volunteered for ECF all through high school, and other sister Emma has participated with the family in ECF’s Tricky Tray fundraiser.

Raised in Scotch Plains, Jack just graduated from the College of William and Mary with a degree in economics and is planning to get a Masters in accounting from Rutgers. He has been volunteering for ECF since he was a freshman in high school and throughout college during summer breaks, doing everything from filing to making posters and flyers for events to researching event locations. “I generally just help out with whatever Barbara needs,” Jack says. His motivation to volunteer was a desire to help on the local level and his experience with family friends diagnosed with cancer and how devastating it can be. “These two factors made my decision to volunteer at ECF an easy one, and one that I find fulfilling,” says Jack. Aside from helping others, Jack loves playing basketball, softball and video games. Barbara says, “any questions I have about sports, Jack is my go to person.” She was happy to have Jack pitching in over this past summer. “He is a great volunteer,” she says. “He has such a bright future ahead of him.”

ECF IS GRATEFUL TO THE FOLLOWING FOUNDATIONS AND CORPORATIONS THAT PROVIDED RECENT GRANT SUPPORT:

Builders General Supply Company
CDW
Independent Order of Odd Fellows of NJ
Jersey Mikes Subs
Joseph Lapinski Foundation
Plymouth Rock Management Company
United Way of Gloucester County
Westfield Service League
Whole Foods Market

THANK YOU!!
in memory of A DEDICATED VOLUNTEER

Bob Peneno, a good friend, supporter and volunteer at ECF, passed away on August 26th, 2018. Bob helped out at the Northern Regional Center of ECF for over 10 years, mostly answering phones.

Bob’s career began at his father’s printing company. Later as a soldier in the Vietnam war, his skills were used as a map maker. His night time work became the daytime maps for the reconnaissance and bombing missions of the Air Force.

His true career was as a teacher at the Passaic County Technical Institute, where he taught for 35 years. He sparked up his off hours by racing stock cars. Bob and his wife Joyce enjoyed their four grandchildren and liked to travel and sprinkle in a cruise every year.

Written by Kay O’Connel, fellow long-time ECF volunteer in the Northern Regional Office.

All of us at ECF will miss Bob and his industrious contribution to our mission.

YOGA, WINE AND CHOCOLATE
November 9, 2018

ECF FAMILY HOLIDAY PARTY
December 2, 2018

HOLIDAY BOUTIQUE
December 4, 2018

ANNUAL CRYSTAL GALA
February 9, 2019

BASH AT THE BRICKHOUSE
March 15, 2019

DESIGNER HANDBAG BINGO & 5TH ANNUAL TRICKY TRAY
April 27, 2019

SPRING TEA
April 28, 2019

CONTACT US

908.322.4323
info@emmanuelcancer.org
www.emmanuelcancer.org
67 Walnut Ave., Ste. 107
Clark, NJ 07066
facebook.com/EmmanuelCancerFoundation

“Thank you for being there in our darkest days.”

This is what Jack and his mom Erin wrote on a card to ECF and is the kind of message that inspires us to work hard every day on behalf of families like theirs. Jack was diagnosed with lymphoma in April when he was 6 years old. He endured a whirlwind of chemo treatments which didn’t end until right before his 7th birthday in August. Fortunately, his most recent scans showed no evidence of cancer, and he is feeling much more like himself! The family’s ECF Caseworker Kelly Dyckman started meeting with Jack for supportive and play therapy in July. His parents were hoping to have someone with whom Jack could express his feelings in relation to having cancer, along with day to day stressors. Kelly said Jack’s parents were also “in total awe” of the birthday basket sent by ECF and have been so appreciative of our support. Kelly added, “Jack is an absolute riot. He keeps me on my toes and expresses himself through play and storytelling. He loves cars and the Titanic. His memory for detail is incredible, and I wish I had his energy!”

ECF Newsletter created in collaboration with the Independent Order of Odd Fellows of New Jersey – proud partners in support of kids with cancer. www.ioof.org