

Positive outlook gave her strength

With World Cancer Day just two weeks ago, a teen cancer survivor shares her story with WEE RAE

Two years ago, during her modern dance CCA practice, Ariqah Nur U'Fairah, 15, fell on her right while warming up but felt an odd cramp in her left leg.

Thinking it was just a normal muscle spasm, she did not bother much about it. However, the discomfort soon turned into a sharp pain in her lower back that caused her sleepless nights.

"(I would wake up) around midnight every day. It was very, very painful, and I thought it was my tailbone that was cracked," she said.

Little did Ariqah know that she had cancer.

Today, she is in remission and, using her experience, she intends to raise awareness of childhood cancer in Singapore.

FEELING ENDLESS PAIN

At first, Ariqah could not even lie down due to the pain, and had to sleep in a seated position. In school, she alternated between standing and sitting during lessons to alleviate the pain.

"My instinct told me that (the cramp) was something more than that," said Ariqah's mother, Ms Norazleenah Mohd Said, 40.

Some seven weeks later, Ariqah's parents insisted she be examined via a magnetic resonance imaging scan at KK Women's and Children's Hospital.

When the results came back, it confirmed Ms Norazleenah's worst fears – her daughter, the eldest of four children, had cancer.

Ariqah was diagnosed with stage 2 mesenchymal chondrosarcoma, a type of cartilage cancer.

However, her parents did not break the news to her immediately. It took about three weeks for them to reveal the results.

"As a parent, I need her to be ready, I wanted to prepare her. We were thinking, 'how do we actually tell her?'," said Ms Norazleenah.

But Ariqah had already Googled her symptoms and had some idea of what her condition was, she said.

In fact, she smiled when the doctor



Ariqah, whose cancer is in remission, intends to use her experience to be a young advocate for childhood cancer awareness in Singapore. ST PHOTO WEE RAE



I didn't feel sad. I told myself that no matter what, I had to be positive, because positivity leads to everything."

Ariqah, after learning that she had cancer

broke the news. "The doctor was like, 'Why are you so happy to know that you got cancer?'," she said.

"I didn't feel sad. I told myself that no matter what, I had to be positive, because positivity leads to everything."

A BUMPY RECOVERY

Ariqah's road to recovery took about six months, which she described as "a bit of a roller coaster".

She first underwent six hours of surgery to remove the tumour from her spinal cord. As she was rolled into the operating theatre, Ariqah said she started crying.

"I was scared and very, very nervous... It was my first time going for surgery," she said.

After that, she underwent chemotherapy, with a central venous catheter – through which the chemotherapy drugs are delivered – placed into a large vein in her chest.

"A lot of people asked me, 'Is it painful?', but it didn't feel that painful," she said.

"(With each session), I felt like I was growing stronger, like I could fight back."

Some side effects of the cancer treatment, however, included her losing her appetite and getting moody or cranky at times, which made her withdraw from company.

As she was out of school, Ariqah

also found herself drifting from some of her friends when she was unable to meet them as often.

Ariqah's parents took turns to stay overnight at the hospital. Her mother, who works as a service coordinator, also took afternoons off work to accompany Ariqah during her treatment.

"Throughout (the six months) I was just thinking about my parents. Thinking about my parents, thinking about school," she said. "I missed getting scolded by my teacher."

To pass her time, Ariqah spent most of her days drawing or strumming to the tunes of her favourite artistes – Ariana Grande and Charlie Puth – on the guitar.

After taking a year off from school, Ariqah finally returned to Riverside Secondary School in January this year, where she is currently repeating Secondary 2.

To raise awareness about childhood cancer, Ariqah intends to share her story with her entire school during a morning assembly.

She plans to talk about resilience, and hopes that her experience will inspire her schoolmates to have a more positive outlook on life.

"No matter how hard life is, it won't just stay there. Life goes on, you can't remain sad your whole life. In every life, there's light," she said.