



Battle with cancer showed her the **power of positivity**

Wee Rae finds out how a teenager kept her spirits up while she battled cancer and how her recovery inspired her

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

Thinking it was just a normal muscle spasm, Ariqah did not bother much about it. However, the discomfort soon turned into a sharp pain in her lower back that gave 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, which means there is little or no signs of cancer, and she intends to raise the public's 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 sitting 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 that she be examined by magnetic resonance imaging 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, 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.



Ariqah intends to share her story of dealing with childhood cancer with her entire school during a morning assembly. ST PHOTO: WEE RAE

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, a form of cancer treatment. Chemotherapy liquid was injected, via a central venous catheter, into a large vein through 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 treatment, however, included her losing her appetite and getting moody or cranky at times.

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 the tunes of her favourite artistes – Ariana Grande and Charlie Puth – on a guitar.

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

As part of her goal of raising awareness of 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.