

ASHLEIGH'S STORY

I still feel those fleeting feelings of invincibility. The same ones that you have as a kid jumping off of the swing set; or when you get your first car and are blaring the radio with your friends in the car. I can still feel it, but now it's in the moment a test comes back negative or a body scan comes out clean. These are my new victories, and they are so important.

My name is Ashleigh and I am 29 years old. I am Li-Fraumeni positive and I am living my life like the normal 29-year-old woman that I am. I spent a lot of my life hating that word yet 'normal' is now one of the sweetest sounding words that I have ever heard.

My mom was 35 when she was diagnosed for the first time with breast cancer. It was an early catch, but she was the first person in our family to be diagnosed and the word 'cancer' held a lot of power. She is one of the strongest women I have ever known. While maintaining a household, raising two kids, a cat, a dog and supporting my dad in his professional career, she continued to wage the war between 'cancer' and 'normal'. The battle won, we started new adventures together, learning about life and conquering battles that consisted of parent-teacher conferences and training the new family puppy.

She was diagnosed again 2 years later. Back to the battlefield we all went and again, with the combination of good doctors and the love and support from family, we once again came out victorious. We went through this combat two more times before the other side triumphed. My mom, Deidre, passed away at 44. It was the most traumatic thing to happen to our family, and it will never be the same.

In 2009, my father was lucky enough to find another soul mate. It's hard to say 'how lucky can one person be' considering the suffering that he had to go through – that we all went through. His new wife, Chandler, is a wonderful woman with two amazing daughters, Lauren and Haley.

Five years after their marriage, I was diagnosed with stage 3 breast cancer at 27. I knew what I had to do...just survive. It started normally; the chemo, the single mastectomy, the radiation. My oncologist was an amazing and insightful woman. She suggested a DNA test assuming it would show positive for BRCA I or BRCA II. We were surprised when testing came back negative. With insurance not covering a second round of testing, we moved forward with scheduling reconstruction. In the meantime a benefactor came forward, a friend of the family, offering to pay for the second more complete round of genetic testing. It took a couple of weeks to get the results back and at the time, I had just finished up with radiation. There it was: the results came back positive for Li-Fraumeni Syndrome.

This is a rare genetic disorder that predisposes a person to developing a myriad of cancers throughout their lifetime. This diagnosis was as much of a relief as it was a blow for me. It means that I am going to have to take special precautions to make sure I am steering clear of anything that may cause cancer (the sun, smoking, fast food, excess stress...you know, all the

fun things in life! Just kidding. Kinda.) Yet I am grateful to know so that I can adopt a health program that will maintain my longevity. It may have changed my mom's path of life had there been the DNA testing program available at the time.

Knowledge is a powerful thing and in this case, could be life-saving. Had I known what I know now my cancer treatment protocol might have been changed to not include radiation, which can cause melanoma. DNA testing changed the course of my life. I am so proud of my family and friends and continue to live a grateful and fulfilled life because of them. Blessed is an over-used word, but I can't think of anything else to describe what I am....so yeah, I am blessed.