

**NARRATIVE
NONFICTION**
Reads like fiction—
but it's all true

Lauren Bendesky,
cancer survivor

Umbri

COURTNEY ORTIZ

A YEAR IN THE LIFE OF A GIRL WITH CANCER

BY KRISTIN LEWIS



AS YOU READ, THINK ABOUT:

How has Lauren dealt with the challenges of having cancer?

Two jars—one filled with pink glass stones, the other with blue—sat on the windowsill. Above them, the large window was covered with dragonfly stickers, photos of smiling friends and family, and bright-pink letters that spelled L-O-V-E.

They were the kind of cheerful decorations you'd expect to see in any teenage girl's bedroom. Except this was not a bedroom. It was a hospital room. And inside, 15-year-old Lauren Bendesky was fighting for her life.

Lauren had a type of cancer called neuroblastoma. And so far, the treatment had been intense. Her weight had plummeted. She had endured extreme nausea and blisters on her mouth and throat. There had been days when she was so sick that she had to be fed through an IV. And all around her had been the sounds of medical machines—a percussive melody of beeps and bleeps that allowed an army of nurses and doctors to keep close tabs on her condition.

These noises had become the soundtrack to her life—the soundtrack to the blur of hospital stays, scans, tests, and procedures that had started the moment she was diagnosed with cancer.



broken

Holding a bag of blue and pink stones, Lauren looked at the jars on the windowsill. Those jars were part of a ritual she performed at the end of each day. First, she would reflect on how the day had been. If she felt good, she would take a pink stone and place it in the jar for pink stones. If bad, a blue stone in the jar for blue stones.

Lauren thought for a moment. Yes, the day had been hard. Yes, she was worried. But if Lauren was anything, she was hopeful.

Lauren reached for a pink stone.

“My World Stopped”

Until the spring of 2012, Lauren had been a happy and healthy teenager. She was a competitive dancer in her hometown of Coral Springs, Florida, and a gifted student. She loved playing the viola and chowing down on buffalo chicken sandwiches, her favorite.

But on the morning of May 27, her life changed forever. Her mom, Sharon, noticed a strange lump on Lauren’s belly. As a nurse, Sharon understood right away that it could be serious.

“I’m taking you to the hospital,” Sharon told her daughter.

Lauren said no way. She had final exams and an orchestra concert coming up. Besides, Lauren pointed out, she felt perfect. Nothing hurt. She was not tired. How bad could it be?

But Sharon insisted. And at the hospital, alarmed

doctors sent Lauren to surgery.

What the surgeons found inside her was a 15-pound **tumor** shaped like a football.

Neuroblastoma, as Lauren and her family would soon learn, is a cancer of the **nervous system**. It tends to grow in the abdomen or along the **spinal cord**. It is the most common cancer in infants but is rare in teenagers.

The news was devastating.

“My world stopped,” Lauren says. “Everything felt like a blur.”

How could Lauren—an active, energetic teenager—have *cancer*?

Runaway Cells

From the time it was coined around 400 B.C., *cancer* has been a frightening word. Today, nearly everyone knows someone who has had cancer, maybe even someone

who has died from it. And though cancer is far more common in older people, anyone can get it at any age.

So what is cancer, exactly?

Actually, cancer is not one disease. Rather, it’s the name for a group of more than 100 different diseases. What these diseases have

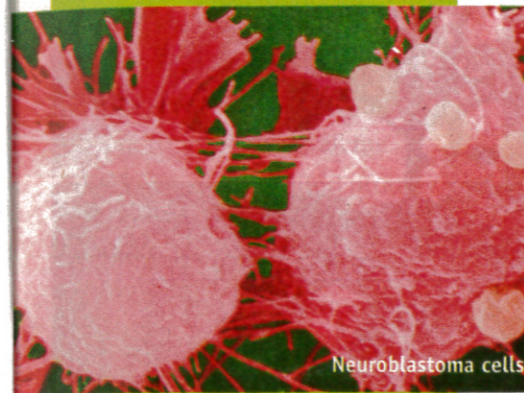
in common is that they all have to do with **cells**.

Cancer is a condition in which cells become abnormal and start growing and dividing very quickly. Unlike normal cells, cancer cells don’t know when to stop

growing. They just keep growing and dividing out of control, like a car without brakes. Often, they clump into tumors like the one in Lauren’s abdomen, damaging surrounding tissues and organs.

Sometimes cancer cells **metastasize**, or travel to other areas of the body, where they grow and

The word *cancer* was coined by the Greek doctor Hippocrates after he observed tumors in his patients. It comes from the Greek word *karkinos*, or *crab*. The hard consistency of tumors probably reminded him of crab shells.



Neuroblastoma cells

WHAT CAUSES CANCER?

Cancer is thought to be a disease of aging, and in most cases, it is. Smoking, polluted air, too much sun, or exposure to toxic chemicals increases the risk for cancer later in life. But a risk of cancer can also be hereditary—that is, passed down from a parent—or cancer may develop after certain infections. It may also grow for no apparent reason at all.

The types of cancers that develop in children are different from adult cancers. Childhood cancers are often the result of changes in cells that take place very early in life. The good news is that the vast majority of kids who get cancer will survive. Because their bodies are more resilient, they tend to respond better than adults to treatments like chemotherapy.



Lauren’s first time outside in weeks. She had to wear a mask to protect herself from germs in the air. Below: Lauren’s jars of pink and blue stones

can form new tumors. When that happens, the disease becomes far more dangerous.

And that is what had happened to Lauren. The neuroblastoma had spread into her bones.

Highly Toxic

On a hot and muggy day a little more than a month after her diagnosis, Lauren stepped into a hospital room at Joe DiMaggio Children’s Hospital in Hollywood, Florida. She was about to start fighting the most important battle of her life.

During the past 50 years, scientists have made incredible advances in cancer treatment, particularly pediatric cancers like Lauren’s. Lauren’s **oncologist**, Dr. Brian Cauff, had a variety of powerful tools at his fingertips. Lauren’s treatment, he explained, would take about 15 months. And it would be grueling.

There would be radiation therapy, in which a beam of energy would be pointed at Lauren’s skin to incinerate the cancer cells beneath. There would be **antibody** therapy, in which drugs would help Lauren’s immune system in its fight against the disease. And there would be a radical procedure in which some of Lauren’s cells would be removed, frozen, and later returned to her body.

But first, Lauren would receive chemotherapy, a mix of highly toxic drugs. These drugs are incredible—they can seek out fast-growing

cancer cells and obliterate them—but they are essentially poison. So it was critical that the dose be precise: Too much chemotherapy would damage Lauren’s body; too little wouldn’t kill the cancer.

Even with the correct dosage, chemo can cause many side effects. One of cancer’s brutal realities is that patients get a lot sicker—simply from the treatment—before they get better. Dr. Cauff made sure that Lauren and her family understood what she would face: the loss of her hair, sores in her mouth that would make it hard to eat or drink, nausea, and **fatigue**.

Starting July 4, Lauren’s first round of chemo was administered in the hospital over the course of five days. Then she was sent home for three weeks to recuperate before her next round. The chemo wiped out her immune system, so she had to be careful. Lauren couldn’t leave the house without wearing a mask to protect her from germs. Fresh fruits and veggies and even tap water were out of the question. A tiny germ on a carrot, a single bacterium on a wet towel—these were dangerous to her.

Lauren endured with grace and determination. She persevered even when the chemo made her so sick she couldn’t walk more than a few steps without losing her breath.

Tough Questions

Dealing with cancer isn’t just about battling to survive. It’s also about learning to cope with a whole new life. Kids like





"Going through something as horrifying as cancer can break you apart or pull you together," Lauren says of her family, pictured above. "For us, it really brought us closer and showed us how strong we were."

Lauren had to say a temporary good-bye to their friends, their favorite activities, and their schools. They trade basketball games for surgical procedures, summer camp for afternoons of chemo infusions, friends for doctors and nurses. They have to confront a reality that most of us don't have to consider until we are much older—that in the blink of an eye, our lives can change forever.

Yet through it all, Lauren found ways to stay positive. She learned everything she could about neuroblastoma, impressing even Dr. Cauff with her knowledge. There was no way she could keep going to school during her treatment, so she threw herself into online classes, selecting the most challenging ones she could find. In the hospital, she looked forward to visits with her mom, stepdad, and 8-year-old

brother. She drew strength from her friends, who sold bracelets at school to raise money for her skyrocketing medical bills, and from her doctors and nurses who became like a second family.

And then there were the jars. "The jars were a way for me to see how I thought my journey was going," Lauren explains, "whether I was staying positive or when I started to become more negative."

On her most difficult days, Lauren reminded herself that she was loved. "I just looked for the light at the end of the tunnel," she says. "I had so much support all the time. Anytime I was feeling down physically or mentally, my family and friends were always there to keep my spirits up."

Soon enough, Lauren had to get a bigger jar for the pink stones. She had filled the first one to the top.

Something Changed

But then there was her hair.

Lauren had been warned that it would fall out. But she held out hope that by some miracle her famously thick brown locks would withstand the assault of chemo.

They didn't.

After her second treatment, her hair started falling out in clumps—a handful on the pillow, a fistful in the drain after a shower. She avoided looking at the trash bins in her house, which always seemed to brim with her hair.

Finally, Lauren realized it was time to shave her head. She vowed, though, that no one would see her bald. With the help of her aunt and grandmother, she picked out a beautiful wig. She loved it so much that she informed the nurses in the hospital she was never taking it off. She even slept in it.

Then, in October, Lauren and her family attended a conference for families dealing with cancer. She was shocked to see all the teenagers walking around proudly displaying their bald heads.

Something changed for Lauren after that. Losing her hair was part of her journey. It was a badge of courage. Why should she hide it? She never wore her wig again.

Triumph at Last

By the spring of 2013, Lauren seemed to have turned a corner. She had survived six rounds of chemo, nine rounds of radiation, and countless blood transfusions. She had made it through days and nights when she was in so much pain that the slightest touch on her skin was excruciating. She had been on painkillers so powerful that she hallucinated.

Yet each day, Lauren was a little stronger. And to Lauren and her family's joy, tests showed no evidence of neuroblastoma. The cancer, it seemed, was gone.

It's been two years since Lauren first stepped into the hospital, and life, in many ways, has returned to normal. She is back at school and hopes that she will soon be strong enough to get back to more

WHAT CAN YOU DO TO HELP?
Shave your head for cancer



Lauren works with an amazing organization called the St. Baldrick's Foundation. Each year through St. Baldrick's, hundreds of schools hold special events like this one at Fisher Middle School in California. Students shave their heads to show support for kids with cancer and to raise money for research. **Why not hold a St. Baldrick's event at your school?**

activities she loves, like dance.

She knows that, like many childhood cancer survivors, she could face complications later in life—or a return of her cancer. But she confronts these possibilities with her usual resolve. She is participating in a medical trial,

testing a medication that researchers hope will prevent the return of the cancer.

One day it may be Lauren herself offering hope to teens who confront cancer. Inspired by her own doctors, she plans to become an oncologist, specializing in neuroblastoma.

This past summer, Lauren volunteered as a mentor, helping other kids who have cancer. She also started her own foundation,

Lauren's Love. Kids undergoing treatment will receive jars and pink and blue stones, just like Lauren had.

"People think of cancer as such a bad thing, and in so many ways it is—it takes so many lives, and even for people like me who do survive, it causes so many side effects," Lauren says. "But I think it's something that can be so positive. It teaches you that you have to be grateful for what you have, even if it's not what you dreamed of." ●

WRITING CONTEST

Kristin Lewis writes, "Dealing with cancer isn't just about battling to survive. It's also about learning to cope with a whole new life." How has Lauren's life changed? How has she coped with the challenges she has faced? Answer both questions in a short essay. Use text evidence. Send it to **LAUREN CONTEST**. Five winners will get *After Ever After* by Jordan Sonnenblick.



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