

A Father's Story

It has been said that a person is never as tall as when they kneel to help a child, and a parent is never as helpless as when it is their child.

On November, 3, 2006, my family's lives were changed forever. My six year old son, Ryan, had been complaining of a headache for a couple of weeks, so we went to the doctor. We had seen the doctor a couple of weeks before Halloween and Ryan was given a prescription for allergies. He was feeling better, but when the prescription ran out he started having the headaches again and sleeping a lot.

This day, the doctor noticed that Ryan was much worse than he had been the two weeks before. He checked his optical disks and even had another doctor verify what he had found. Both doctors agreed that Ryan needed a CT scan to find out more about what was going on with him.

I wanted to be with Andrea, my wife, and Ryan when he went through the test, but before I got there Andrea called to say it was over. Soon the doctor would be calling with the results. I found Andrea and Ryan in the waiting room, and so we waited.

The nurse came to tell us that the doctor was on the phone for us, so we left Ryan watching TV in the waiting room and took the call in front of the nurses station. Andrea was talking to the doctor when her eyes began to tear up and terror filled her face. She had a piece of paper and she quickly scribbled on it that they had found a mass.

She began to cry and handed me the phone. The doctor told me that he was in contact with Arkansas Children's Hospital in Little Rock, and was working on a course of treatment. We were told that Ryan would be transferred to ACH by helicopter. Andrea and I made calls to family and work to let them know what was going on.

Ryan's doctor closed his clinic and came to the hospital to be with us. Our friends and my boss all were at the hospital in no time to be with us and see what we needed or what they could do to help.

Ryan's doctor showed us the CT scan which revealed a tumor the size of a golf ball behind Ryan's right eye. It was causing pressure and causing his headache. We were then informed that the helicopter would be there in 30 minutes and that no one would be able to fly with Ryan.

We stayed with Ryan until the helicopter was about to lift off, and then Andrea and I pulled ourselves together and started home to get everything done so we could be on the road as fast as we could.

By the time we got home, there were friends, neighbors, and our preacher at our house helping us get ready to leave. They started taking care of laundry in the washer, taking food out of the refrigerator that would go bad, taking the trash out, and getting Ashtyn, our nine year old, home and clothes packed. I am not sure how many people were there while we were getting ready or how many were still there when we left. We learned everything at about 2:30 in the afternoon and by 6:00 pm we were on the road to Little Rock to be with Ryan.

Traffic was worse than I had ever seen and it was killing us not knowing how Ryan was doing. We would not be there for hours, so we called friends in Searcy. They were only an hour away from the hospital, so they got to the hospital right after Ryan and stayed with him in the PICU until we got there. Ryan talked his nurse into letting him use our friend's cell phone to call us to let us know he was okay. When the phone rang in the van, we thought it was our friend, and when we heard Ryan's voice, so much weight was lifted off our shoulders just knowing that he was safe and had people that loved him with him.

It was still hours before we could get there but the trip went by quickly. When we got there, we went right in and were able to see Ryan. Our friends were there, and family members had also arrived about an hour before us. By 1:30 am, all travelers were in the hospital with us and had been in to visit



Ryan.

Ryan was scheduled to have an MRI on Saturday and be monitored until Monday, and then a small surgery was scheduled to put a drain tube in his head to relieve the pressure.

During the night, Ryan became critical and took a turn for the worse. No medicine helped as he woke up about every 20 minutes shrieking in pain. I was looking into his eyes and he was not in there. I had to try to calm him and call him back to us to get him to settle down and rest. By Saturday morning, he began to posture. I thought he was stretching, but I was wrong. His pupils were different sizes and not responding. They made us leave the room and a team of what seemed like twenty doctors and nurses came in to work on him. Ryan was put on a ventilator and had a hole drilled into his head and a drain tube put in. We were told that he was going to have an MRI if they could get him in before surgery. They had to remove the tumor to save his life.

Within twenty-four hours after we took our son to the doctor for a headache, he was in an operating room fighting for his life, and we were totally helpless. We sat in the PICU waiting room waiting for any information. My brother set up a CaringBridge web site for Ryan.

Hurry up and wait is all that we could do that day. By 10:00 pm that night, Ryan was out of surgery and the doctor told us that it was a cancerous tumor and that he was unable to remove all of it. When we went to see Ryan that first time, he had tubes and wires everywhere and he was still on a ventilator. He was awake, briefly, and I asked him to give me a thumbs up and he did with his right hand. When they tested him he had movement on his right side, but none on his left.

Of all the pressures that needed to be monitored, the internal pressure inside of his head was the most important. They put Ryan in a drug induced coma and then had to lower his body temperature to help the healing. They put him on a refrigerated blanket and lowered his body temperature to 90 degrees. He was monitored and watched around the clock by doctors and nurses. He could not have any outside stimulus because it would raise the pressure inside his head.

By this time, it was Tuesday, and we had many friends and family visiting. I was staying in the hospital room with Ryan, Andrea was staying on the second floor and all the other family members were staying at a hotel. By the end of the week, we were living out of our van and staying at the hospital around the clock. That Saturday, November 10, most of the family had gone home, and Andrea was staying at the Ronald McDonald House with my mom, and Ashtyn was staying with friends at home. My brother left around noon or so because of the long seven hour drive home. A couple of hours after he left, they took Ryan off of the medicine that was keeping him in a coma and he woke up. I posted on the CaringBridge site, HE'S AWAKE, HE'S AWAKE. It was the happiest day we had had in a while. He was still on a ventilator, but he was awake and sleeping a lot.

Soon, he was off the ventilator. I had told him all along that we would watch the movie Cars whenever he wanted to. About 2:00 am one morning in the PICU, we watched that movie. Since then, he tells me that Cars is his favorite movie.

About ten days after the surgery, Andrea and I were called into the meeting room to talk to Ryan's cancer doctor. We were informed that Ryan had a glioblastoma multiforme (GBM) type of cancer in the fourth stage. This type of cancer normally occurs in men with an average age of forty-five, who would have a 20% chance of survival of five years. Because they were unable to remove the entire tumor, we were given an 11% chance of survival of five years. When we asked what a child's chances were, we were told that they did not have any data because it was so rare in children. We did not accept that and the doctor told us that with Ryan, we would only accept 100%

The prayers started, and by this time, people from all 50 states and some 20 countries around the world had signed into Ryan's website. Other parents from our town that we did not know had come by to see us. We live 225 miles away from Little Rock, but they came to see us because they had children that were fighting different types of cancer themselves and knew what we were going through. To know someone that is feeling the same thing you are going through is priceless. To know that people around the world are praying for you is so comforting. All that Andrea and I had to worry about at that moment was taking care of Ryan.

Ryan was in the PICU for 13 days. He was then moved to the 4th floor because he was doing so much better. He was on the floor for less than a week, and on Ashtyn's birthday, November 22nd, Ryan was moved to the 5th floor for rehabilitation. Thanksgiving this year was celebrated in the hospital, but every day we had Ryan with us was Thanksgiving to us. Ryan began therapy to get his left side back. He began

with his leg a little and then his arm. It was so encouraging to see the improvement every day. At one point, he was throwing a fit and very calmly I told him that if he was going to kick and slam his arm down on his bed, he had to use his left side to do that, and he did. He moved that side more than he had all week. From then on, he started getting better. He impressed everyone that came into contact with him. He had a shunt put into his head to help with the draining and to keep the pressure down. He also had a port implanted under the skin on his chest so they would not have to stick him all over again.

Four weeks after Ryan's surgery, he began the next phase of his treatment. He would have to have 30 radiation treatments Monday through Friday, and 42 days of chemotherapy. He started the treatments on December 16th and was released from ACH. He had been in the hospital for 43 days.

We could not go home, so we moved into the Ronald McDonald House so he could continue his PT/OT therapies, his chemotherapy, and his radiation treatment. I was back working so I could take care of Ashtyn and have her back at home. I was driving down each Friday night and back on Sunday with Ashtyn so we could see him. The first time I came back to see him, I was stunned at how much better he was. He greeted me downstairs in the lobby when I came in. I fought back the tears as he hugged me with both arms, BOTH ARMS! Just days before, he could not move his left side and he was now walking with a brace and hugging me. I cannot put into words the feelings that I had at that time.

Ryan finished his chemotherapy on January 18th and finished his radiation treatments on January 22nd. My mother had stayed all but five days in Little Rock with Ryan, and Andrea had stayed all but about four days. I stayed the first five weeks, but then came home to get Ashtyn home and back to a more normal life.

After that, we all came home. It had been 80 days since Ryan had been at home and we were all so proud. Everyone called to see how he was and how we were. It was indescribable the emotions that we were feeling.

We were home for two weeks before we had to be back for a follow-up MRI. On February 5, Ryan and I went back to ACH. His doctor informed us that he was so pleased with the way Ryan had responded to his treatment that he was going to talk to the Neurosurgeon and recommend another surgery to remove the rest of the tumor.

On February 13, we met with the Neurosurgeon and a second surgery was scheduled for February 23. We sent out a prayer request on Ryan's website and all 50 states replied again along with another 15 countries. The second surgery went so much better. When Ryan woke up, he was able to move his left side as before the surgery, no setbacks. He continued to improve and after six days, he was released from the hospital.

Six days. The afternoon after he was discharged, he got a fever and we spent most of the night in the Searcy ER. The next day, March 1, we had to go back to ACH because of his fever and he was re-admitted and spent the next four days in the hospital and was released again on March 4th. On March 6th, after his stitches were removed, Ryan was allowed to come home again. He returned March 26th for another MRI and everything looked good, so far.

He has to take Chemotherapy for five days every four weeks and will have to do that for the next two years. He is improving his mobility and is actually playing T-ball.

Talk about blessed. My family is so blessed with his progress. When he plays, both teams cheer him on, everyone here knows Ryan. We do not know what tomorrow will bring, but with everything he has been through he will be able to handle it.

Ashtyn has been collecting pop tabs off of soft drink cans. She has the whole school collecting them and each time we go to ACH, we stop by the Ronald McDonald House to deliver them. The people at the Ronald McDonald House are truly angels. They give so much of themselves and were always there when we needed anything. Knowing they are there if we ever need them is so comforting. I hope that God blesses them and blesses you as much as he has blessed my family over the last six months.

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