

Student experiences growth despite illness

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On the surface, he appears to be living the life of a normal, 19-year-old college student, but life threw the UNC Asheville student a curveball on July 18, 2003 — a diagnosis of leukemia.

“The fact that I had cancer affects me in subtle, but very deep ways,” said Michael Thompson, a sophomore creative writing student from High Point. “You will never see anything wrong with me on the surface when it comes to a lot of the things that I went through.”

He knew he was sick, but it wouldn't affect his elementary school friends.

“That's what I told people, that I had cancer, but I was not contagious, so it was cool,” said Thompson, with a smile gleaming on his face. “That's all that mattered. It didn't affect the person I just met on the recess yard. It was just my thing. All I wanted was to get back to tag.”

Thompson said cancer could not stop his fun-loving nature. His optimism helped pull him through those three years.

Because there were lots of kids around, he made a few friends in the hospital.

“I don't remember these people's names. I didn't know who they were,” Thompson said. “I sometimes didn't know if they were boy or girl because being a child and being bald, you can't tell.”

Making friends was easy for Thompson because everyone in the children's hospital wanted to play.

“As a kid, you don't care who people are. You don't care what they stand for. You don't care what their political views or values are,” said Thompson enthusiastically. “You care about that, ‘hey, are you cool? Are you fun? Let's play.’”

One friend in particular Thompson remembers, a 7-year-old girl named Ashley, who was also diagnosed with leukemia and always willing to play.

He and Ashley personally connected through their diseases and their families did too.

“Her and my sister became very good friends,” said 19-year-old Thompson, “and her mom and my mom became friends.”

His friend made his time in the children's hospital more fun. They not only



Photo Courtesy of Michael Thompson

Michael Thompson plays video games in the hospital beside his mother while undergoing treatment for leukemia.

played games, but they talked about life as in-depth as two elementary schoolers could.

“Of course this is a stereotypical story, but she died with a smile on her face,” said Thompson, his voice quivering. “But she still died.”

“My drive to keep going was ignorance. Nobody told me I could die. Life in itself is so beautiful and amazing.”

Michael Thompson

He had never met anyone with such resolve and that is why Ashley does not leave his mind to this day.

“She will forever remain a symbol of what I went through and will be someone I'll never forget,” Thompson said.

Thompson wishes he had a surviving friend from his time in the hospital to

talk to about his past because he does not like when people are overly sympathetic.

Thompson said he had an experience that greatly affected how he views sympathy.

He was a poster child for the charity Pennies for Patients during his time in the hospital.

“I remember meeting someone recently, before I left for college,” Thompson said, “and he said, ‘hey you were the guy on all the posters around my school. The sick kid,’ and I was like, ‘yeah, that was me.’”

He didn't like being famous for having a disease. He believes it exploits a certain side of people and plays upon compassion to make them donate.

“I felt like that Sarah McLachlan commercial,” said Thompson. “I didn't like that.”

One person who treats him as he would like to be treated is his girlfriend, Gabrielle Brodman, a freshman new media student from Cary.

She said Thompson's best quality is

his caring side, but cancer is not the only reason he is the man he is today.

“I think it made him stronger,” said Brodman. “He fought through and was able to come out as a better person.”

Thompson's friend, Joseph Coyne, said he grew up with him after he was cured.

“Ever since I've known him after that, he's really had an affinity towards trying to bring happiness or joy into other people's lives, just through being himself,” Coyne said.

Thompson doesn't always feel as strong as his friends and family believe he is. Surviving cancer still lingers in his mind in his everyday life and leaves bad memories.

“I try not to go to the hospital now, ever,” Thompson said.

The last time he went was in his junior year of high school, to catch up with doctors and nurses from his childhood.

Thompson felt nostalgic being surrounded by the hospital staff, equipment and patients.

“I sat down, was waiting,” said Thompson, his voice growing softer, “and seeing these children there really tore me apart.”

Thompson now feels desensitized to physical pains like finger pricks and needles, but the emotional aspect lingers.

He questions why all of the children in the hospital have to go through what he went through.

For Thompson, getting over something as serious and life-changing as cancer is relieving. Survivors are just grateful to be done with something that took that part of their life away.

Going back there and seeing those children going through something he went through made him feel like it wasn't over.

“I hate, not hate, that's too bad of a word, I resent that kids are going through what I had to go through. It's not fair,” Thompson said. “I don't want them to believe that they are less than they are and that cancer defines them.”

Thompson does not like to think his personality entirely stems from having cancer. He said each experience and interaction is an opportunity to grow, learn and prosper.

“My drive to keep going was ignorance. Nobody told me I could die,” said Thompson. “Life in itself is so beautiful and amazing.”