

Cancer is not a stranger in my life. I was diagnosed with GIST (G.I. Stromal Tumor) in 2016 and was subsequently diagnosed with the genetic disorder Neurofibromatosis (NF). NF is a condition that causes tumors to grow along nerves. There are very few treatments and no cure. My son was first diagnosed with Neurofibromatosis in 2007 at the age of 2. He is now 17 and has been battling a brain tumor for the past 9 years. He has been on 2 different regimens of chemotherapy and has had 3 brain surgeries. One of those surgeries left him with a seizure disorder. He is monitored through MRI's every 3 months. After my 2016 surgery to remove the tumor, I learned that I unknowingly passed along NF to my son. So both my son and I live with this uncertain condition and both see many specialists to monitor our health.

I have volunteered for the Children's Tumor Foundation since my son's diagnosis. This organization is the largest non-profit dedicated to research and patient support of NF. Volunteering for them meant raising awareness and much-needed research money, and has given me a sense of being able to do something for my child, where I am otherwise helpless. In addition to my own experience with cancer, I have spent many days and nights at the Children's Hospital of Philadelphia with my son.

Having cancer and being a caregiver to someone with cancer changed my perspective on what's important in life. It has taught me to let the little things go and to be present in the moment, for you never know if you'll get another moment. I started paying more attention to what I put in, and on my body, and what I feed my family. I now am more aware of how I react to external triggers, and I've developed a daily self-care routine. I try to surround myself with happy and positive people. I want to be a good example for my children and teach them the value of good health.

My first job out of college was as an exercise physiologist in cardiac rehab with direct patient care. I loved working with patients in the healthcare setting and thought about becoming a nurse. Being in the children's hospital so often over the last 15 years with my son has reconfirmed my dream of becoming a nurse. While my son was on treatment or getting one of his three brain surgeries, it didn't seem possible for me to pursue the idea of becoming a nurse, as stress was high and time was limited. When the pandemic hit, and we were all confined to our homes, I started investigating potential pathways to my dream. My son was in a good place, medically speaking. I decided it was a good time for me to do this and I started taking classes at the local community college. Just last year, I applied and was accepted to the AD Nursing Program at Bucks County Community College, and I will start clinicals this fall. I am so thrilled to be able to pursue my dream of becoming a nurse.