

“Attitude is a little thing that makes a big difference.” ~Winston Churchill

When Jami (McAllister) Gorneault described her fight against cancer, she said it has been filled with ups and downs—but mostly ups. “I’m positive and hopeful that I’ll remain a survivor for many years!” she said.

The 1999 graduate of Holyoke High School was diagnosed with melanoma in 2005. A mole was removed from the middle of her back, but the situation was very hopeful. The cancer was only in Stage I, and since Gorneault caught it early, doctors told her there wasn’t a high chance of the melanoma coming back.

It did come back. Gorneault said there was a large lump found in her underarm last May. The melanoma had progressed to Stage III and was now in her lymphnodes. Luckily only one had the cancer, and doctors removed it from her left underarm.

Gorneault said her initial reaction to cancer was fear. Like most people, she knew relatives who had lost their battles with cancer, and just the word itself has a negative connotation in general.

Even though the fear could have controlled Gorneault’s situation, she chose to be positive about her diagnosis. “I’m not as fearful,” she said. “I have a lot of hope.”

Gorneault noted cancer treatments are advancing, and that helps give her a positive attitude. “The word cancer is scarier than what I’ve been through so far.”

Treatments started for Gorneault four months ago. The treatments are called immunotherapy—a concept based on the body’s natural defense system which protects the body from a variety of diseases. The idea is to strengthen the immune system, enabling it to fight off the cancer itself. The goal of immunotherapy is to develop a method to harness and enhance the body’s natural tendency to defend itself against cancer.

Former HHS student stays positive as a cancer survivor

Written by Darci Tomky

Gorneault said the hope of using immunotherapy is to prevent the cancer from coming back.

She said the first month was the most intensive since she needed to receive the treatment five times a week. Now, in the second stage, she can give herself the injections just three times a week.

The nickname for immunotherapy is the “year-long flu.” Side effects include being tired and having headaches. Gorneault said that even though the treatments haven’t changed her lifestyle too much, there are often events she will skip out on simply because she doesn’t feel up to going. She is just now going back to work again, working as a substitute teacher on the days she feels good enough.

“Overall I feel like my spirit is good,” she said.

Currently living in Springfield, Mass. with her husband, Gorneault said they will be moving around because of her husband’s career in minor league baseball. With the system of doing self-injections, she said wherever she lives she just needs to keep up on having doctors do blood work once a month.

She was happy to report that in December she had her 6-month CAT scan with results showing no evidence of cancer!

Since her cancer diagnosis, Gorneault said she definitely has had a change in perspective. “I look at life differently,” she said. The little things of life make more of a difference now.

In addition to the change in attitude, there has also been a change in lifestyle. Before 2005, Gorneault said she tried to be tan just like the societal standard told her she should be. After that first scare with melanoma, she began to take precautions.

It is important to always wear sunscreen, whether one has melanoma or not. Gorneault advised

Former HHS student stays positive as a cancer survivor

Written by Darci Tomky

people to avoid being in sunlight from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m., but be sure to wear hats and sunglasses when you have to be outside. She also said to avoid tanning booths.

With such a positive attitude toward her cancer, Gorneault shared some advice for other cancer patients. One good thing about cancer, she said, is that patients have time to make good decisions on which treatments to pursue and the changes they need to make in their lives. Gorneault chose immunotherapy, but she also chose to research nutrition, educating her on the proper foods to be eating.

Cancer patients shouldn't hesitate to reach out for support and accept help from others. Gorneault said people are very willing to give support in cancer situations, and sometimes the hardest thing is accepting their help.

"Have faith in God," she advised. "Be confident he will take care of you."

Finally, Gorneault encouraged cancer patients to "do everything in your power to fight it and enjoy every day!"

Gorneault is spreading awareness about cancer and especially wants to get more involved with getting melanoma awareness out. Opportunities for involvement locally include Phillips County's Relay For Life held June 4-5. Visit www.phillipscountyrelay.org for more information.