

Charlotte WEEKLY

ABOUT THE COMMUNITY, FOR THE COMMUNITY

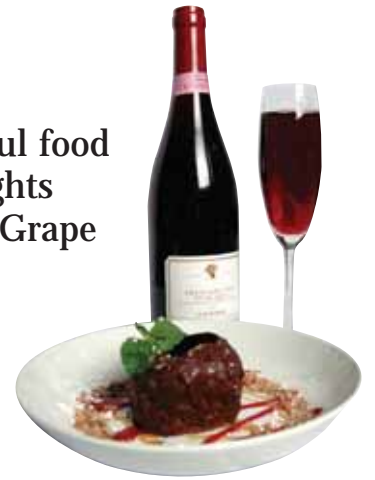
Volume 5, Number 9 • March 3-9, 2006

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A study in spunk

Vance High School junior enlists faith, family for third bout with cancer

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Soon to be 17, Brittany Boone loves to talk. She fires off about 550 animated words a minute so listen closely: she's got an amazing story to tell.

Round three

Not your typical teenager, the Vance High School junior has faced – and beaten down – two bouts with cancer. She's about to wage war on a third.

In 2002, 12-year-old Brittany experienced bone pain that led to a diagnosis of Stage IV neuroblastoma, a childhood cancer that develops in nerve tissue. Patients at Stage V, she explained, are generally directed to hospice care. But that's not her story.

Brittany underwent six rounds of chemotherapy, surgery to remove a grapefruit-sized malignancy surrounding her spinal cord, more chemo and a stem-cell transplant requiring 27 days of quarantine. After nearly two years in remission, she experienced a nagging, familiar hip pain that she hesitated to bring up. "I didn't want to speak anything negative," she said, "but it was the same kind of pain." Brittany knew what it meant.

A CT scan showed something abnormal; the consequent biopsy revealed a quarter-sized grouping of malignant cells on her hip bone. The relapse demanded three cycles of "very, very, very painful chemotherapy," Brittany said, as well as radiation and more hospitalization. This round of specialized treatment, delivered at Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center in New York, concluded two days before Christmas 2005.

Immediately the new year brought new concerns. Low leukocyte counts indicated the 16-year-old had a different form of cancer: leukemia. Brittany admitted feeling lost when her oncologist learned of the second cancer in her system.

Brittany Boone, foreground, prepares to combat cancer a third time, armed with strength, faith and support from parents Melodie and Tony and the community.

Bobby Cochran/CW photo



She had always looked to him for clear answers. For the first time, she felt he didn't have one.

"I had my day where I was upset and didn't know what was going on. ... I got myself together and said, 'We're going to do this.'"

Coping mechanisms

Brittany enters this third battle with plenty of armor: faith, family and her own resolve. Brittany's parents are both ministers at New Covenant African Methodist Episcopal Church in North Charlotte. Strong and focused, Tony and Melodie Boone have instilled in Brittany a steady faith that helped her overcome her doubts and confusion upon her leukemia diagnosis.

"I serve a God that does miraculous things, things that nobody can understand," Brittany said. "If you limit yourself to just what people (doctors and technicians) know, then there's so much that you won't understand."

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“And you block God out from doing something great in your life,” said Melodie.

Brittany is cavalier about her treatments, shrugging off even the painful ones as just a necessity. “I learned that sometimes you have to realize what needs to be done and not necessarily dwell on how you feel about it. You may not feel comfortable ... but some things need to go forth so you can go forth too,” she said.

Her parents echo that practicality. Tony said they vowed not to lose sight of their sons, Brian (now 12) and Bryson (now 7), in the shadow of Brittany’s illness. They alternated, one parent spending time with Brittany while the other made sure the boys’ lives continued as usual: school, homework, piano and guitar lessons, other activities. Instead of separating them, Tony said, “it just really brought us closer together as a family.”

Through her illness, Brittany discovered that writing helps. “All the times when I was upset or depressed, I was using those pages as an outlet. I couldn’t carry the burden of what I was going through so I would give it to those pages.”

Community embraces cause

Last month Brittany completed another intensive round of chemotherapy as she prepares for another stem-cell trans-

plant. This time Brittany’s own stem cells are not the source material. She must rely on a matching donor.

Jacob Koehler, senior class advisor and math teacher at Vance, coordinated a Feb. 18 bone marrow drive at the school. In four hours, 109 participants were listed on the national bone marrow registry.

The community showed up to support Brittany and the drive, yet she knows a match from the newly registered donors is not likely. The screening, typing,

matching, donating and marrow processing may take months. “She just wants to help other people in her situation,” said Koehler. The Boones hope for a donor match already on the register.

The family expressed gratitude because they’ve received support in many forms. School administrators coordinate homework and activities for Brittany, and neighbors and church members arrange child care and meals as needed. Students at Vance have raised money to offset

health care expenses by selling purple wristbands imprinted with Brittany’s name, and senior Rachel Ruben is spearheading plans for a walkathon fundraiser in April. Koehler said Bank of America branches are accepting donations to a Brittany Boone Cancer Fund. The Boones said they feel blessed by the community’s kindness and inspired by Brittany’s indomitable spirit.

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BRITTANYISMS (ALL DELIVERED AT LIGHTNING SPEED)



Bobby Cochran/CW photo

Brittany Boone

On good days and bad days: “I remember the day my hair came out for the second time and it really should have been a bad day but I was just like, ‘Mom, I gotta get some wigs and then I’ve got to get a new outfit to match my wig’ because I love shopping. I’ve learned that usually your good days will outweigh your bad days, so there’s no need to complain.”

On Boone’s theory of negativity (i.e., how she remains positive): “I was studying science and came across (a) law of physics: energy is never lost or destroyed; it’s simply transferred from one party to the next. If I’m negative about what’s going on, then when Momma comes in she (senses it and)

then she’s negative. ... And then Dad sees I’m (not doing well) and he goes, ‘Brian, calm down! Your sister doesn’t feel good,’ and that negative energy just gets passed from person to person. So I try to start the day positive.”

On Melodie’s comment that they pray hard for a donor match but then place it in God’s hands and sleep with no worries: “All because the blood shed on Calvary is the perfect match to me.” (Met with a low whistle, a “That’s powerful,” and Melodie’s “That’ll preach!”)

On her leukemia: “Look, I can’t see it, it’s not that big, I can’t feel it, don’t know what it’s doing ... (shaking her head) Uh-uh! It’s not gonna beat me.”

Study in spunk

(continued from page 3)

'Whatever. I'm movin' on.'

Brittany said of the leukemia diagnosis, "Some people had this pegged as the beginning of the end for me. Not only did I have this one type of cancer but now I have another one. ... Because I had been taking therapy for so long, I sustained a

lot of damage to my vital organs. ... They didn't want to treat me anymore because I'm already in this 'dilapidated' state. Whatever," she said with a dismissive wave. "Some things I know I've got to do." She ticked off on her fingers: "I haven't graduated, still don't have a car, don't have my license; I'm gonna go to college. ... I've got too much left to do, so I might as well keep going!" □

More than 25 million get with the (Medicare) program

Enrollment numbers on target for first year of prescription drug program

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services is on track toward its goal of enrolling 28 million to 30 million individuals in the Medicare prescription drug coverage program during its first year of operation. By February's end, more than 25 million Medicare beneficiaries had enrolled in the new prescription drug program. That number reflects more than 5.3 million beneficiaries who signed up individually in the last three months and 1.5 million who enrolled in the last 30 days.

HHS Secretary Mike Leavitt noted that those with coverage include not only individuals enrolled in stand-alone prescription drug plans, but also those in Medicare Advantage plans and retirees who are in employer- or union-sponsored plans that are now receiving Medicare support to secure coverage gaps.

More than 500,000 new beneficiaries have enrolled in the Medicare Advantage health plans since drug coverage enrollment began Nov. 15, 2005,

with the majority enrolling in mid-January 2006. While many Medicare Advantage plans offered some form of drug coverage prior to 2006, coverage is now more extensive and no longer includes caps on coverage.

In North Carolina, 813,833 individuals enrolled in Medicare prescription drug plans between Nov. 15, 2005, and Feb. 11, 2006. That number includes 201,270 people enrolled in stand-alone prescription drug plans, 91,112 individuals with Medicare Advantage with prescription drugs, 216,899 automatic Medicare and Medicaid enrollees, 205,260 Medicare retiree drug subsidy recipients and approximately 99,292 federal retirees.

The Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services continue to urge Medicare beneficiaries to sign up for drug coverage at least two to three weeks before they plan to use their coverage. The current enrollment period continues through May 15. Beneficiaries with questions regarding drug coverage are encouraged to visit www.medicare.gov or call 1-800-MEDICARE. □