



Throughout his recovery, Alek Collins was supported by his sisters, Alexia and Alana, and parents, Nicolette and Rod

Journey to RECOVERY

Through Prayer, Faith, and Modern Medicine, the Collins Family Overcomes Their Son's Tragic Diagnosis

Written By Nicolette Collins and Photography by Marisa Hugonnett

Our 11-year-old son, Alek, has always been a happy, funny, intelligent, and creative kid with a strong spirit who loves animals and football. Last fall, like many kids his age, he was excited about playing football and starting middle school. There was a small delay in our plans, though, and this year, we're glad he's even with us to be excited about doing those things.

The Darkest Day

In October 2008 when Alek complained of ringing in his ear, we weren't worried. He's the one in the family who rarely gets sick – in fact we joke about him having the strongest immune system in the family. Nevertheless, we took him in for a check-up where the doctor concluded that he had an ear infection. Seven months later, Alek alerted us that he continued to hear the ringing sound. This prompted us to visit an ear, nose, and throat specialist, who associated this with possible water in his ear from Alek's extensive swim team activities. The doctor prescribed him eardrops and nasal sprays, but after two weeks of continuous ringing, we decided to see another ENT. The first of many CAT scans was performed. A dark shadow was found, and the subsequent MRI found a mass. I was devastated and in denial.

In June 2009, we met with a team at M. D. Anderson, who determined that the mass was called an endolymphatic sac tumor and was dangerously positioned only inches away from his brain. My husband, Rod, and I experienced sweaty palms, distress, and disbelief, shocked at how and when this could have happened. We wondered why it had happened to such a healthy child. The tumor was destructive and was eroding everything in its path. Overwhelming responsibility came with the many decisions that needed to be made due to the possible dangers of surgery.

Staying Strong during Surgery

On June 20, 2009 a biopsy concluded that the mass was low-grade cancer, which might require radiation treatment. Because of our faith, we immediately began to pray for healing and wholeness. Alek's next surgery took place at St Luke's, where an embolization was performed to reduce blood flow to the tumor and ensure a more productive removal of it. The embolization was a five-hour procedure which, halfway through, required us to make difficult decisions as parents.

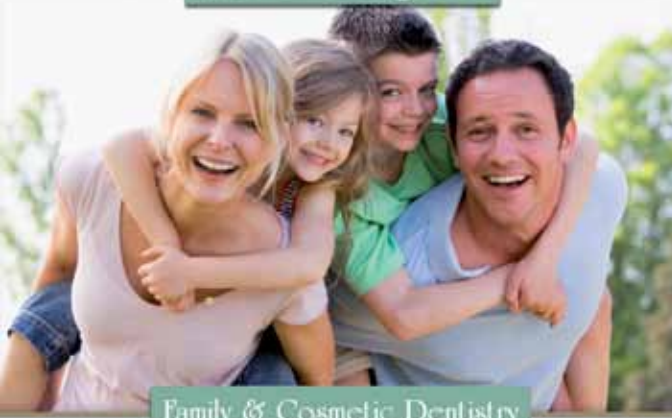
In the middle of the procedure, the surgeon informed us that if he continued, there was a 50% chance that muscles on the right side of Alek's face would be paralyzed and damaged, with



Alek was diagnosed with a cancerous tumor in 2009

permanent paralysis a real possibility. Either we took that chance by proceeding with the surgery or we stopped the surgery and hoped the tumor could be removed without embolization. We had peace from faith and prayer and believed Alek would come through fine, so we instructed the surgeon to continue. The first surgery proved successful. Alek was then transferred the next morning to M. D. Anderson, where the surgery to remove the tumor was performed. Through this, we kept a positive, upbeat attitude to help keep Alek in good spirits. He was so brave and had such a positive attitude.

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Alexia and Alana helped Alek recuperate and did everything they could to help him get better faster

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With a smile on his face as they wheeled him into surgery, he said, "Mom, I'm going to be fine and better than I ever was before, right?" Of course, I agreed. His surgery lasted a grueling 15 hours. With updates every few hours right to the end, it was a time of mixed emotions. We were anxious, but confident things would go well. We prayed a lot and wondered how he would be after the surgery. What a miracle it was when the doctors said the surgery was a complete success and they could not have asked for better!

The Road to Recovery

After one week of hospitalization and painful therapy, Alek came home, though the battle to recover was just beginning. He had to regain his strength, relearn how to walk without a walker, recover his balance, overcome dizziness, and strive daily for the return of his equilibrium. His sisters Alexia, 14, and Alana, 8, became his nurses, waiting on his every call. We all did everything we could to help him get better faster. His grandparents traveled from Ohio, his aunt and cousins came from Georgia, and his friends stopped by to cheer him on.

During his recuperation at home, there was a hiccup in his recovery. Fluid had built up in his head and caused tremendous pressure, pain, and swelling. Meningitis was one of the things the surgeons feared and they wanted to schedule another surgery, which would take place a few days later. But after prayer and careful consideration, we decided against it. In fact, Alek took a stand at the tender age of 11 and said, "If I have to go through what I went

through again, I'd rather have my head stay swollen." He believed he would get better and we also believed he would get better on his own.

Welcoming Good News

It took prayer, faith, vigilant monitoring, and patience. After a few additional weeks, the fluid subsided and Alek was on his way to recovering. After a long six-month ordeal, he started middle school right after Christmas. We couldn't have asked for a better gift. He loves school, is doing awesome, and looking forward to playing football next year. The best news was when we received the final pathology report, which determined the tumor to be totally benign. It was not cancerous and would require no radiation therapy. This was not a surprise to me as this is what I believed and prayed for all along.

I call Alek a triumphant, undefeated winner! Many times when you hear these words, you think of sports; however, in our case we think of Alek and his successful operations and recovery. Throughout this ordeal, I have learned to never stop believing in the power of prayer and the importance of unwavering faith and to always walk with a positive and optimistic attitude in everything you may endure throughout life. SLM

EDITOR'S NOTE: Sugar Land Magazine would like to thank Nicolette Collins and her family for sharing their story of support and hope for young Alek, as he battled his way back to health.



Rod and Nicolette believe in the power of prayer and unwavering faith

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