

The Antonym of Normal

"I don't want to even think about school right now."

For a normal sixteen year-old, this would be a normal sentiment, but Eric Armstrong's life recently became anything but normal.

While most of his friends and classmates enjoyed a day off on Jan. 18, Eric sat in a stuffy hospital room with a blanket draped over his body watching movies and awaiting the next beep from the machine controlling his intravenous flow. Each beep reminded him of the icy chemotherapy chemicals being pumped into his body through a thin cold cable.

"It's tough knowing I have cancer...but I just view this as another obstacle to overcome," Eric said.

Hodgkin's Lymphoma, a cancer causing abnormal growth of a subset of white blood cells called lymphocytes, manifests itself in the swelling of the lymph nodes, most commonly in the neck.

Hodgkin's Lymphoma primarily affects men ages 15-35 and over 50. According to the Cancer Treatment Centers of America, Hodgkin's Lymphoma is a relatively rare form of cancer, accounting for less than one percent of all cancer cases in the United States.

Eric is the first student in at least thirty years of Sterling High School history to have been diagnosed with any form of cancer.

The cause remains unknown, but the disease has a 90% cure rate when treated with chemotherapy and surgery.

"I've had to have two [surgeries] so far," Eric said on his way to his first chemotherapy treatment.

Eric's mother, Valerie Armstrong, became worried when a large lump appeared on his neck.

"It was a miracle [we found it]," Valerie said.

Eric agrees.

"A lot of people who have it, their swelling is not really visible, so the doctors don't catch it as early," Eric said.

His doctors are confident they can eradicate the cancer completely.

"With as young as Eric is and as early as we caught it, he has a 95% or greater chance of being cured," Dr. David Rosen said.

Eric and his family, however, cannot help but feel anxious.

"It didn't really hit me as a big thing, but then when I called my sisters and they started bawling, that made me realize how big of a deal it was," Eric said.

Dr. Rosen immediately set up chemotherapy treatments after Eric's Jan. 6 diagnosis.

"I have four treatments with three weeks off in between each treatment," Eric said. "If the cancer is gone by then, then I'll have to do radiation, and then I'll be done."

If the cancer is not yet gone, another four to eight weeks of chemo await.

Through it all, Eric has recognized the support of his friends and family.

"I've been praying for Eric and helping him both emotionally and physical whenever I can." Taylor Fair, fellow sophomore said.

When Eric told them he had cancer, his youth group gathered around him and spent nearly an hour praying for him.

"We were led by the spirit to pray for Eric," Armstrong's Youth Group mentor Paul Brandes said. "It was a totally awesome experience; we really felt God's presence there."

The Sterling Crossfire Youth Group is not the only support system in Eric's life. His mother has been his biggest supporter, making sure that he gets to his appointments on time, and researching more about the disease.

"We're just taking this one day at a time and by the grace of God, were doing all we can." Valerie said.

She is not alone. During his first chemotherapy session, both of his sisters, one traveling from Manhattan, Kan., visited to keep him company. His grandparents have also taken him to sessions so that his mom could go to work.

"It's so much easier to go through this when my family is around me," Armstrong said.

As for that school work...

"Eric's got something more important to do than learn literary terms," sophomore English instructor Melissa Feil said. "I'm happy to streamline his assignments."

Under Eric's circumstances, the last thought on most people's minds would be staying involved. Eric is not most people.

"Although Eric's not been able to come to many of the practices, he has still been part of the team and is coming to the games," basketball coach Derek Schneider said.

Eric is the antonym of normal but strives to keep the average-high-school-boy lifestyle alive and healthy by staying active and positive.

"I'm just going to keep taking it one day at a time," Eric said.