

## INSPIRATION

in(t)-spe-'rā-shen *n* 1. a divine or supernatural influence 2. to be an animating, enlivening, or exalting influence on another; to spur one to act 3. to draw forth or bring out

# Tour de Harrison

## One seven-year-old's race to the Arc De Triomphe

Al and Leslie Strickler beamed proudly at their six year-old son, Harrison, clad in bright yellow and a bike helmet decorated with the Eiffel Tower. It was Halloween and Harrison was dressed as his hero, champion cyclist Lance Armstrong. The Stricklers were elated that Harrison had just placed second in a local costume contest in their hometown of Richmond, VA. No one would have guessed that just four months later this happy family's life would be turned upside down.

### Diagnosis

Harrison had been fighting a sinus infection for two weeks and was placed on antibiotics by his pediatrician. After taking the full course of antibiotics, he was having difficulty breathing at a play date and kept complaining of a stomachache. Al and Leslie could tell that their son was in a great deal of pain. Could it be a broken rib from the night before?

The concerned parents brought Harrison to the Patient First Urgent Care Center. After a brief consultation, Harrison was immediately shipped to St. Mary's Hospital ER and transported to VCU Medical College of Virginia. At this point, Al and Leslie knew Harrison's condition was serious.

Harrison was diagnosed with Acute Lymphoblastic Leukemia (ALL T-CELL) on February 29, 2004 and spent a week in the PICU. Harrison's white blood count was 229,000, which is extremely high. The doctors found a mediastinal mass-enlarged

lymph node in his chest, which explained his shortness of breath. Coincidentally, Harrison's diagnosis occurred on a leap day. This enabled the ever-optimistic Stricklers to quip that they only have to be reminded of this heart-wrenching day every four years.

### Treatment

Harrison began high dose chemotherapy treatment three days after his diagnosis. He was in the hospital 21 out of 31 days that March. His chemo "cocktail" consisted of a six week induction of high dose methyltrexate, prednisone, doxyrubicin, vincristin, mercaptopurine and L-asparaginase. In week seven, Harrison began consolidation chemotherapy, which meant hospital admissions every three weeks for six to eight days.

### Coping Techniques

Al and Leslie used *The Nutcracker* as an analogy to simplify the explanation of the war going on in Harrison's body. They told Harrison that he had "mice" in his blood and the good soldiers and the bad mice were having a war inside his body. This seemed to help Harrison comprehend the reasons he was feeling nauseated, weak and tired.

Harrison received a great deal of support from friends and family, including his two sisters Maggie and Olivia. Together, the three siblings often played at the hospital with Legos, colored and even rode one of



By Kelly Desatnik

Harrison's most prized possessions, a motorized jeep that he received for his seventh birthday. Al and Leslie try to make sure that Harrison rides his jeep every day. This is part of their plan to create a normal family existence for their son. It seems that their continual efforts have paid off, as Harrison recently learned to read while in the hospital.

Ironically, Harrison's babysitter, Johanna survived Leukemia as a child. Johanna, a licensed massage therapist, used the wonders of massage therapy on Harrison and talked about her experience when she was a child. She gave Harrison living proof that people with his illness do recover and survive.

### Lance Armstrong as an Inspiration

The Stricklers have received tremendous support from The Lance Armstrong Foundation during the course of Harrison's illness. Family and friends wear the foundation's signature LIVESTRONG wristbands to support Harrison and other cancer patients. Wearing this band reminds them to keep going everyday and push through any obstacles they face.

Harrison and his family watched Lance in the Tour de France and rooted him on every step of the way. Every victory Lance made felt like a personal triumph to Harrison. The Stricklers refer to Harrison's race to recovery

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