



Survivor Stories

Wendy Stockwell

My name is Wendy and I am a brain tumor survivor. I am very thankful to say that I have been cancer-free for 15 years. I hope my story helps to inspire not only those who are facing this challenging disease, but also the people who have managed to beat the cancer, but are still coping with the physical and emotional scars that the tumor left behind.

I was only 12 years old when my odd symptoms first began. While I've heard that many people with brain tumors experience severe headaches and vision problems, my symptoms were very different. In the fall of my seventh grade year, I started experiencing a roaring sound in my ears followed by an inability to understand what people were saying. I never lost consciousness or "phased out," it just seemed as if people were speaking a foreign language. These episodes would occur for just a minute or two, and then I would slowly regain my ability to interpret what was being said. Looking back, it seems as if that should have scared me to death, but being only 12, I just dismissed the episodes and even became quite good at hiding them. Over time, it started happening more and more often.

Finally, that spring, a teacher of mine contacted my parents to express her concern about the changes she had seen in me over the past few months. Because she knew my older brother had epilepsy, she was concerned that I might have it as well. My parents quickly scheduled an appointment with my brother's neurologist, expecting a similar diagnosis. Though the EEG only showed one slight eurythmia, the doctor felt that further testing was needed. They then scheduled a CT scan followed by an MRI. I will never forget my doctor's face as tears welled up in his eyes, and he asked my mom to come out into the hallway



Wendy and Eric Stockwell

with him. Much to her horror, the MRI showed a golf ball size tumor on my left temporal lobe. Being so young, I didn't fully grasp the seriousness of the tumor or how difficult and painful my recovery would be, but in two short weeks I would begin the journey that would change my life forever.

While the first days after the initial surgery were excruciatingly painful, the long term recovery and adjustment to my new life was by far the most challenging. Before all the craziness began, I was a happy kid with lots of friends, good grades and a passion for sports. I didn't understand the seriousness of how the tumor, and especially the surgery itself, would affect me. Since the left temporal lobe is responsible for short term memory, after the surgery I found myself unable to recall names, numbers and even what simple objects were

called. It was frustrating, once being a tutor myself, now forced to see a speech therapist in order to remember what a chair is called! The challenges continued as we discovered that the brain trauma from the surgery also caused me to experience a new kind of seizure that was so painful I would be unable to move or speak for several minutes. This new seizure is very rare and actually triggers the area of the brain that feels extreme panic and fear. The first one I had I actually dropped to my knees because my brain was telling me I was petrified even though there was nothing happening around me.

Despite all of my new challenges, I was determined not to let the tumor run my life. My scholastic improvement took patience and commitment. The surgery didn't actually cause me to lose my memory, it just damaged my ability to retrieve what I already knew. Following the surgery, I saw two therapists specializing in memory who taught me how to use other areas of my brain to retrieve and memorize information. These sessions were tedious and often frustrating, but the work paid off and I was able to graduate from both high school and college with a 3.5 GPA. Though I am still terrible with names and I've given up trying to learn Spanish, I'm certainly not complaining!

My athletic recovery took determination, as well as a little creativity. Dissatisfied with my doctors' restrictions, we began brainstorming how to bend the rules without breaking them. The first conflict was that my doctor demanded that I wear a hard surfaced helmet if I insisted on playing sports. Of course, the athletic directors wouldn't allow me to wear a hard surfaced helmet because they said it would be too dangerous for the other kids. After numerous ideas were rejected by one side or the other, we were finally able to create a helmet that was accepted by both. The helmet was made of compressed foam rubber with an additional inch of urethane foam glued on the outside, protecting the surgical area. Between the odd looking helmet and my ponytail sticking out of the ventilation holes on one

side, my teammates and I joked that it was a scare tactic against our opponents!

Looking back, it amazes me how supportive, patient and creative my family, friends and doctors were considering my determination (and sometimes stubbornness) to live my life the same way I did before. I was also deeply touched by the compassion of fellow classmates. Kids did everything from shaving their heads to making hospital bracelets the new fad.

But as thankful as I am to all of the people that were there to help me, there is no question that I would not have made such a miraculous recovery without the love and support of my parents. Despite my even having a grand mal seizure during a basketball game, my parents never stopped me from playing the sports that I love. I know that, even though their hearts wanted to protect and shelter me, it was their willingness to let me push myself and even let me fall that allowed me to recover both physically and emotionally.

Unfortunately, when I was 17 I was informed that the tumor had grown back, and they would have to do another surgery. I was devastated. Because I was so young when I was first diagnosed, my parents and doctors decided I would have a better recovery if I didn't know that the tumor could possibly return. Although I am now very thankful that they made the decisions that they did, at the time I was shocked and furious. Knowing that I had to face all of the pain and fear all over again was almost more than I could bear. But once again with the love and support of some very special people in my life, I underwent a second surgery and prayed for it to be the last.

It has now been 17 years, and though I have an occasional seizure and I will be on medication for the rest of my life, I feel that I am fully recovered. I know that I am like many survivors in that I am actually thankful to have been given this experience. As miserable as things were at times, the inner strength and perspective that it has now given me is

irreplaceable. Feeling sorry for myself isn't an option, especially when I know how many wonderful people haven't been able to win this fight.

Though, medically speaking, I know very little about the cause and treatment of brain tumors, I do know that it is something no one should have to face alone. I strongly believe that attitude plays a big role in a person's battle and recovery when fighting cancer.

I feel that everyone who has been affected by this disease, whether directly or through a loved one, has a responsibility to spread the word about the signs and symptoms of brain tumors. In my experience, early detection is critical. What's more, my hope is that through the efforts of The Kelly Heinz-Grundner Brain Tumor Foundation we can all work together to educate, support and inspire those affected by brain tumors and reassure them that they not alone. 