

KEVIN CHEN



CANCER SURVIVOR

BY SHOUVIK MANI & SABRINA JEN

INDEPTH|33

I WAS IN A STATE OF DENIAL.”

Senior Kevin Chen has lost track of the last two years. As he looks back on the time he spent in and out of the hospital, he recalls only bits and pieces of his memories. He tries to connect the dots, but struggles; the dates, months and years have all become a blur to him now. The sunlight hits his face, illuminating his gaunt features, as Chen begins to tell his story.

It all started with a visit to the pediatrician in Chen's sophomore year. He had noticed a lump on the left side of his neck and wanted to get it checked. Initially, he thought it was just an allergic reaction. The doctor warned, however, that it could be lymphoma, a type of blood cancer, and suggested he get a more accurate check up at a hospital with better equipment.

"When the doctors first told me, I was like 'No, it can't be,'" Chen said. "But most of the time I just didn't think about it since the lump didn't impede any activities."

Because there were only a few weeks left in the school year, Chen's parents decided to wait until summer began to confirm the diagnosis at a hospital.

Forced to face the truth

It took a trip halfway around the world to get a more accurate diagnosis. During his summer vacation in Taiwan, Chen visited two doctors to get evaluated.

After having a biopsy on his neck, he was diagnosed with Acute Lymphoblastic Leukemia, a type of cancer that develops in the white blood cells, which are central to the immune system. The cancer spreads through the body to other organs such as the liver, spleen, or in Chen's case, the lymph nodes in the neck. It has a 40 percent survival rate.

"I was really shocked. I was scared. After the news, we went to eat lunch and I just broke down crying. I didn't want to talk to anyone and just wanted to be by myself," Chen said. "I didn't want to be admitted, but of course I had to."

After that, he immediately entered the hospital. What should have been a quick check-up during a family vacation unexpectedly turned into six months of hospital treatment.

The initial treatments included four to six rounds of chemotherapy administered about at monthlong intervals.

"I just felt really sick all the time," he said. "It was like constant nausea. [When other people tried to talk to me] I might be too tired and I might just ignore them. I didn't want to talk to anybody sometimes."

Chen's younger sister, junior Emily Chen, explained that it was difficult adjusting to the environment of the hospital in Taiwan.

"The hospital walls were really white and scary looking," Emily Chen said. "Overall, it kind of resembled a scene where horror movies took place."

Additionally, Chen was forced to deal with the language barrier as well as unfamiliar culture in Taiwan.

"I got really lonely because I had no friends in there," he said. "In a few months I wanted to go home."

Thankfully, he did not have to go through these months alone. His family stayed in Taiwan with him.

"I wouldn't know what to do if my family wasn't there. My mom stayed with me the whole time," said Chen.

Although it was difficult for Chen's mother, C.J. Wang, to accept her son's condition, she stayed strong and optimistic for him.



"I didn't think about how the situation was unfair, I didn't think about what life would be like if this never happened," said Wang. "Instead, I tried to face it as a challenge in our lives that we just had to overcome with the most positive attitude at that given moment."

Emily Chen also tried to bring positivity into her brother's hospital life.

"In Taiwan, he was surrounded by all these adults: my parents, my grandparents, the nurses, so he didn't really have anyone to have a normal conversation with," she said. "I would try to joke around with him to get him to talk about everyday things that had nothing to do with cancer."

For Emily Chen, having the chance to spend quality time with her brother was a very special opportunity.

"Before Kevin got cancer, we were the kind of siblings who always fought and argued about things," she said. "But after, I learned not to take him for granted and we both got more considerate of each other."

Eventually, Chen's cancer entered a stage of remission, which is characterized by a de-



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crease in the signs and symptoms of the sickness. It was incomplete, however, since there was five percent of the cancer cells left in his body. But since the treatments in Taiwan were over, Chen was able to come home.

Coming Home

By the beginning of 2012, Chen was back in the U.S. His weak immune system, however, prevented him from returning to school. He was put on close watch with frequent checkups at Lucile Packard Children's Hospital (LPCH) in Stanford University. He also faced several food restrictions: no raw vegetables, meat and thin-skinned fruits. Even

after following these precautions, his cancer relapsed in May 2012.

This time, instead of receiving more rounds of chemotherapy, Chen was told that in order to avoid serious problems, he would also need to go through several rounds of radiation as well as a bone marrow transplant. His doctors wanted him to be living within 20 minutes of the hospital for the first few months post-transplant in case of an emergency. Because of this, Chen lived at the Ronald McDonald House in Palo Alto, Calif. for the next 100 days.

"The rooms at Stanford were really colorful and felt more like home compared to the ones in Taiwan," said Emily Chen. "I could tell that Kevin was

happier there."

The attitude of the doctors in the U.S. also allowed Chen to learn new things while he was there. Wang appreciated that the doctors would personally explain every procedure with great detail to Chen, respecting and listening to all of his opinions.

"Doctors and nurses at LPCH treat children and their opinions with great respect," said Wang. "Once, when Kevin had a biopsy in his leg and had to have his stitches removed, Kevin asked his doctor if he could do it himself, since he was curious." She described how the doctor, without hesitating, sat down next to Chen and began explaining to him what all the tools were for and how to perform the procedure and very patiently watched Kevin take out his stitches.

Since the treatments during his relapse were much more critical than those done before, Chen faced many dangerous risks, including the possibility of death. His appetite was poor throughout his treatments, and he would often not eat for weeks, resulting in the usage of intravenous therapy, which is when nutrients are infused directly into the veins of a patient.

"At the worst time, he weighed only about 108 pounds, about 25 pounds less than he was before the treatments began," said Wang. "Honestly, I'm really amazed at how Kevin has gotten through these tough times. His attitude and strength was at all times even stronger than that of an adult."

Following this 100-day period, the checkups and medication slowly tapered off. Soon, Chen would be able to enjoy the little things in his life again.

Transition into a new class

In the spring of 2013, which was supposed to be Chen's second semester of senior year, he often visited his friends at Lynbrook. As graduation approached, he would sometimes think about where he would be if he had not gotten cancer.

"I wish that I could have graduated with 2013 because you know, I've been with them for forever," he said. "I went to their graduation, it was actually really sad."

But Chen focuses on the good memories. "I was both happy for my classmates and sad for myself. But I'm excited about graduation this year," he said.

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While most students in the Class of 2014 did not know Chen's story, some of his teachers immediately recognized an old face back on campus. One of them was social studies and business teacher Ryan Shull, who had Chen as a student for World History as a sophomore and has him for Virtual Enterprise as a senior.

"Believe it or not, but I actually noticed his absence in his junior year. While I would see students from prior years walking around, I didn't see Kevin. For a while, he was just gone. And then he showed up in my class senior year," said Shull.

Shull learned about Chen's condition only after reading his resume for a project in Virtual Enterprise class. He describes Chen as confident, poised and extremely kind. "I've never heard Kevin whining about anything, ever. He has a positive attitude," he said. "Knowing about what he has been going through for a couple of years, it's very touching. He is facing pretty significant adversity and hasn't given up."

In addition to academics, Chen made a return to the track, although not as an athlete. He served as what track and field head coach Ray Wright calls a "student assistant coach." He is also Wright's teacher's assistant for his P.E. Weight Training class.

"I think it was great [to have Kevin back]. Prior to that, we had seen him on occasions and he didn't look healthy. He didn't look strong enough to come around everyday since he had a lot of treatment going on," Wright said. But once he was feeling much healthier last year, he asked if he could come around and help us and I said, 'Sure.'"

Although Wang has not met Wright personally, she wants to thank him for all the support and motivation he gave Chen when he returned to the track team.

According to Central Coast Section (CCS) bylaws, students are not allowed to play more than eight semesters of a sport unless they face a significant hardship. Since Chen is technically in his fifth year of high school, he



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is filing a waiver with the CCS office so that he can do an extra year of track and field. The application process is ongoing.

"I want to go back to the team," said Chen. "It would be a shame if I didn't do track in my last year."

Wright has noticed significant changes in Chen over the past two years. "From the outside, he is still shy and quiet and just like he was as a freshman," he said. "But he's obviously grown up. He has just turned 18 years old. Going through what he has gone through, I'm sure he gained a lot of maturity."

Chen is back in the classroom and hopes to return to the track. He made his greatest comeback, however, on a Homecoming stage.

Returning to the stage

"Kevin was huge for 2013 both as a dancer and in general," said alumnus Daniel Sun, who was Vice President of the class of 2013 as well as the co-choreographer of the boys' dance in Homecoming skits. "As a dancer, he was one of our top guys who was always in all the pieces. Spirit-wise, Kevin was always there for everyone."

Chen always had a significant impact on the class of 2013's Homecomings, which led to many difficulties following his diagnosis. The boys' dance, which according to Sun was like a "brotherhood," was especially impacted by Chen's absence.

"Boys' dance was something that we always thought about and got excited about and it was hard to picture going through it without him," said Sun. Although Chen was no longer in school for his junior year, he continued contributing to his class.

"Even when he was in Taiwan, he mixed our boys' dance song and I remember we video chatted him the night before so he could check out our run-throughs," said Sun. "It was definitely special having his presence because it didn't feel right without him there."

Although he was unable to participate in its Homecoming, the class of 2013 did not fail to acknowledge Chen's importance.

"The class as a whole knew how much he wanted to be out there with us and they knew how much he had contributed in the past," said Sun. Because of this, the class decided to dedicate their junior skit to Chen.

"[The dedication] really gave our skit that extra layer of meaning and it was definitely something in the back of our minds when we went out and performed," said Sun.

When Chen returned to school this year, he faced the decision of whether or not to help out with 2014's Homecoming. He eventually chose to play a part in it.

After being approached about being in the dance, he chose to participate.

"I thought since I'm already part of 2014, then why not?" he said. Initially, Chen felt awkward being back at school and in homecoming with a different class.

"It's like going to a new school, except you are going to the same school," Chen said. Slowly, he began to acclimate himself as he rehearsed along with his new classmates. He found a way to fit in by becoming one of the main dancers in the skit. At the end of homecoming week, Chen could not have been more proud of 2014.

"Despite my slight impartial feelings toward the class at the time, I know that we

killed it out there and that we looked good," said Chen. "I couldn't have asked for a better Senior Homecoming."

The experience was also his first time dancing in front of an audience since he was diagnosed with cancer.

"I missed dancing when I couldn't. A lot," he said. "But when I was dancing in the skit this time, it kind of felt like I never stopped."

Sun saw how special Chen's performance was this year.

"I know that I speak for every single member of 2013, boys' dance especially, when I say that I was so proud when I saw the video of 2014's performance and seeing Kevin dance again," said Sun. "Seeing him back on that Homecoming stage was really a touching moment for me because he above anyone else deserved that moment."

"The Little Things"

What did he miss the most during his fight with cancer? Chen's immediate answer was clear: school. During his time in the hospital, Chen took the courses for his junior year credits online and in the classes offered by the hospital. But they weren't the same as physically being in school.

Before being diagnosed with cancer, "It's not like I didn't enjoy school, but a lot of times I would not want to go to school and just stay home all day like a typical teenager would want," he said. "But now the process of coming to school and hanging out with friends... that's something that I really appreciate."

For Chen, the fact that he is able to come

to school every day where he has deadlines to push him, teachers to motivate him and friends to keep him company, is a blessing.

"Honestly, I still feel the same as everybody else. I hate doing college apps, I hate doing homework, but the thing is, you start to realize that... you just gotta do what you gotta do."

Throughout his struggle, Chen found the strength to fight his cancer by placing hope in what lies ahead.

"I just did what I had to do, and I just looked ahead to a future that may or may not exist," Chen said. "I'm glad that I can actually be doing college apps because I can actually go to college. I actually have a future in front of me."

Reflection

Even before he was diagnosed with cancer, Chen had a budding interest in music.

"When I was younger, I experimented with mixing and making little things," he said. "But I never really got to expand and explore that interest until after I got cancer, since I had more time on my hands."

During the six-month period in Taiwan, Chen was able to focus on music and ended

up creating approximately 20 songs over the course of his treatments. Making music served as catharsis, helping Chen through emotional ruts.

"Music production helped me because it took my mind off of the current situation," said Chen. "In a way, it also took me into another world of my own."

Supported by his parents, who bought him a keyboard to make music

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before he moved into the hospital in Taiwan, Chen has begun thinking about going into music production for college.

"I also want to consider physical therapy," he said. "My physical therapist and doctor helped me out a lot, so I want to help other people too and return the favor."

Inspired by those who helped him, Chen has begun looking into colleges offering both music production and physical therapy majors, such as the University of Washington.

Chen's condition has also brought his family closer together: his relationships with those around him have not been impacted in a negative way.

"His relationship with Emily has not changed at all, but I think that it is a good thing," said Wang. "Because of Kevin's illness, a lot of things have changed. Emily's relationship with Kevin, which has stayed the same, provides a sense of stability."

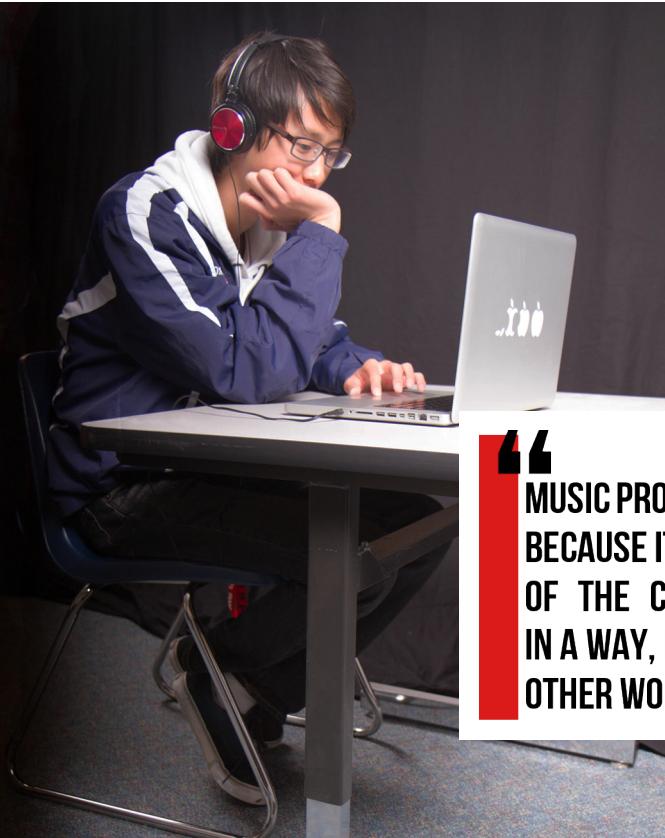
"Sometimes I would just wish that it never happened," he said. But thinking about his experience with cancer from a different perspective, Chen also explained how he has grown throughout the curing of his disease.

"You know how we as kids take life for granted? I learned how we can't take life for granted because it's not for granted. You can die at any time," he said. "So you need to learn how to appreciate things: the little things in life, the big things in life, just anything."

Wang also cautions others about how important it is to cherish life when it is going well, as circumstances can change suddenly.

"Even though we all know that cancer is pretty common nowadays, you don't really understand how much impact it has on someone's life until it is impacting yours," she said. "When it is happening elsewhere, it is like stories being repeated over and over again. Only till the moment it happens to you, do you realize that it is not stories anymore. It is reality. It is life."

On a humid June afternoon in 2011, Kevin Chen received news that changed his life. He found himself at the starting point, having to piece together a new reality. Connecting the dots was difficult for him; there were many times when he thought he had solved the puzzle, only to have the solution slip away. Yet through a positive mindset and the support of those around him, Chen survived his illness. He sits in the soft autumn light, smiling. Kevin Chen has connected the dots. 



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