

Still I Rise

Four inspiring stories of endurance, redemption and homecoming

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Rolando “Roly” Valdes Jr. is a typical teenager. He loves soccer, singing along to Michael Jackson and hanging out with friends. That’s what he spent most of his time doing in Cuba, where he was born.



In April of 2012, he started feeling a severe pain in his right arm. It went away, but an MRI and a subsequent surgery determined that Roly had a tumor in his cervical spine pressing on a nerve cluster. It was sarcoma—cancer.

“I got kind of scared,” he says. “In the movies, the person with it always dies, unless it’s *Breaking Bad*. But they told me ‘no, that [doesn’t] always happen, you can get cured.’”

A 13-year-old at the time, Roly, whose playground had been the streets of Havana, was receiving chemotherapy three days a week. Doctors urged his parents to take him to the United States for even more aggressive treatment.

The Valdes family arrived in Florida on June 3, 2012. A repeat of tests, scans, doctor visits and worrying followed. Soon, Roly began his second round of chemo – five days on, a week off, three days on, a week off – repeated for nine months.

“Back in Cuba [when] I had treatment, the first days I was feeling sick, throwing up every day and then I got used to it,” he says. Here, the chemo shocked his system. “I was starting from zero.”

Roly also had two nodules on his lung as the cancer slowly began to spread. Two months into the chemo, he started radiation to treat the metastasis. “That was the worst time,” he says, “because it was on the neck [and] my throat was swollen so when I swallowed food, it was like swallowing a knife.” After about ten radiation treatments, he could no longer take the pain. “I spent like two or three weeks in the hospital.” He was fed through an IV at Joe DiMaggio Children’s hospital. His mom, Tamara Penaranda, says, “It was the hardest time.”

Through friends in the same situation, Roly’s family found out about Love Jen, Gilda’s Club and the Jessica June Child Cancer Foundation. The JJCCF’s financial aid greatly assisted them. “When we came [to Florida] we were living with my sister-in-law,” says Tamara, “everybody in the same house – 10 or 11 [people].” The center gave the family additional funds for their own home.

February of this year marked Roly’s last round of chemo and radiation. In March, he was deemed cancer free. “We’re so grateful for the hospital, the doctors,” Tamara says. “[They] are very important to us, like family.”

“I felt good kind of,” Roly says. “I was going to miss the people at the hospital but I was going to start living a normal life again, no more worrying about my immune system or all the foods I couldn’t eat.”

Now, he is working toward being a typical 15-year-old. He loves history, social studies, drama and music. For his high school’s production of *Peter Pan*, Roly is Pirate No. 2, and very proud of it. “I want to go [into] performing or medicine but I haven’t decided yet,” he says. He *has* decided that he wants to join the cheerleading team. “I just need that clearance from my doctor and I’ll give it to the cheerleading coach and I’m in.”

“He cannot move [his] neck and the arm,” Tamara says apprehensively.

“No, I can move them,” he says. Dressed in his Jessica June Foundation T-shirt and playing with his phone, Roly argues that cheerleading is safer than contact sports.

To Roly, little seems impossible. Just a year ago, he was in and out of the hospital fighting a disease that, in his mind, only adults get. Now he has a positive perspective, one seemingly unscathed by his journey. To anyone in a similar situation he says, “Don’t give up. Never say never. It’s not the end of the world. You’re just sick.”