

# The relief of poverty and distress caused by illness and disease

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## MEDIA RELEASE

### A second chance at life at 23

When Georgia McLennan was diagnosed with a deadly rare lymphoma at the age of just 23, doctors couldn't believe she was still alive.

She seemed so healthy and vibrant, with none of the usual symptoms presented by this type of cancer.

Yet PET scans showed a very different story to her outward appearance, the disease having spread through much of her body including her lungs, breasts, liver, spleen ... even growing in her fat.

It all started on New Year's Eve 2015, when Georgia started experiencing severe pains in her chest.

"I'd never had heartburn before and I thought that's what it was, even though at the same time I thought it was weird that I would get something like that," the now 24-year-old said.

"Then I started getting stabbing pains on my left side and the doctor prescribed me stomach ulcer medication. But that didn't work.

"I was in that much pain I was going once or twice a week to the doctor who couldn't figure out what was wrong with me."

Georgia was beyond frustrated. She was studying nursing full-time while working part-time in a pharmacy dispensary and while she continued to push herself to continue, everything was becoming more and more unbearable.

"I couldn't sleep, I couldn't do anything I was so uncomfortable all the time. When I was at work I just constantly fell asleep for half an hour. I was really suffering," she said.

This went on for about three months when another doctor finally determined she didn't have a stomach ulcer at all - and nor was it "all in her head" - but, in fact, tumours on her spleen and liver.

"A CT scan showed the tumours were benign, however, a radiologist suggested I see a hematologist in case it was lymphoma. The hematologist initially didn't feel it was lymphoma as I didn't have all the usual symptoms such as extreme weight loss, rashes, fevers and drenching night sweats," Georgia said.

"However, by this stage I was in that much pain I had been taking eight Panadol and six Nurofen per day for three to four months.

"Before the PET (positron emission tomography) scan the pain was so bad I couldn't breathe in and out. I had to pick up my partner Tawanda from the airport.

"I realised I shouldn't be driving and when he saw me he took me straight to emergency."

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Georgia was given an ultrasound which showed fluid where it shouldn't be. She was kept in overnight and a cannula placed in her arm for a drip.

"When I had the scan all these radiologists came into the room to look at me. They couldn't believe how healthy I looked given what they found inside me," she said.

"I was told I have cancer and that I would have to be taken for an emergency biopsy. I found out later they thought I was going to die that weekend.

"I didn't even have my mum there because I really hadn't been worried it was cancer. And then I sat there thinking they can cut my spleen out and part of liver. A liver can grow back. I'll be fine. I thought it would be Stage 1 or 2.

"I was pretty relieved to finally have a diagnosis. I didn't know how bad it was at this stage but I was positive about it because it meant finally getting rid of the pain."

However, the PET scan revealed just how dire the situation was. By this time Georgia said she was so swollen she looked six months pregnant with the scan revealing the cancer had spread through much of her body ... her lungs, breasts, liver, spleen, even growing in her fat.

"When I saw the scan I realised this is very bad. But, while I was in shock, the only time I cried throughout the whole ordeal was when I had to tell my parents. That was the hardest part. My mum at the time was in remission from bowel cancer so I knew how upset they would be," Georgia said.

"And all these doctors couldn't believe how I was even alive, and how positive I was."

Tests revealed the cancer originated in Georgia's spleen and that it was actually a rare type of blood cancer called Burkitt's Lymphoma.

While this was good news for Georgia who appreciated it had a better outcome than other cancers, it was devastating for her partner Tawanda, whose best friend died of the disease in Africa where it is more prevalent.

"Tawanda thought I was going to die but Burkitt's Lymphoma is actually a curable cancer, it's just his friend hadn't the money to get treatment," she said.

"I felt unbelievably lucky because I was in Australia and had access to health care. I didn't feel sad for myself. I felt lucky."

Georgia had three months of daily chemotherapy and spinal injections about every two weeks.

And while chemotherapy often makes patients feel worse, Georgia, who was already tired and in pain, found immediate relief.

"It weirdly made me feel great. In fact, the pain stopped after the very first round. And I could see my stomach returning to its normal size," she said.

"I spent a lot of my time in the Gold Coast University Hospital's chemotherapy chairs. It's so important to be comfortable when you have chemo. You're feeling sick most of time and in pain. They lie down too which I needed because the spinal injections gave me very bad headaches which eased if I lay down."

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Georgia's chemotherapy treatments ended on August 21 but it was to be a bittersweet occasion.

"My mum, Julia, was diagnosed with bowel cancer about a year before me. On the last day of my chemo they found the cancer had metastasized (where the cancer cells break away from where the primary cancer first formed) to her lungs.

"So that meant it had become Stage 4 and that's incurable. Thankfully, so far, the cancer hasn't grown. And she's still feeling fine and staying positive. We all are."

Georgia is completing her nursing degree while working at a nursing home. She hopes to become an oncology nurse.

"I never felt like giving up. You go into a survival mode. And because I thought I was going to die I didn't want to waste the month I had left feeling sorry for myself. I just wanted to be really positive for my family. If they see you suffering they suffer as well.

"And now, in one sense, I don't think I've ever been happier. If you think you are going to die and you survive, it makes you really appreciate things. You are grateful for so much more, things that normally you wouldn't notice."

Gold Coast Hospital Foundation will hold fundraising lunch Care for Cancer to raise much-needed funds for the Cancer Patient Transport Service as well as chemotherapy chairs at the Gold Coast University Hospital. The lunch will be held on March 16 at Palazzo Versace. Tickets are \$110 per person or \$1100 for a table of 10 and can be booked at <http://bit.ly/2n96huS>

Gold Coasters can also donate to the Gold Coast Hospital Foundation by visiting [gchfoundation.org.au/donate/](http://gchfoundation.org.au/donate/).

The Gold Coast Hospital Foundation was established 23 years ago as the official charity for Gold Coast Health, which includes Gold Coast University Hospital and Robina Hospital. The Foundation raises funds to help medical professionals make a difference in the lives of sick and injured children and adults each year, delivering a range of vital programs, medical equipment and research funding. Gold Coast Hospital Foundation helps more than 95,000 each year in the local community.

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For more information, please contact Vanessa Jones on 0421 057 129