

Tips For The Long Distance Caregivers

# Caregiving in America

*3* Easy Steps  
to Journaling

HOW TO BE A  
LONG DISTANCE  
CAREGIVER

*Shanna Decker*  
Living with Cancer and  
Sharing Hope

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Shanna Decker is a sophomore in college and a volunteer with Brighter Tomorrows. Shanna says, "The surgery was a blessing. With a prosthetic leg, I have the opportunity to do almost anything I'd like to do."

# FAM

When Shanna was first diagnosed with cancer at the age of seven, she hid under the covers and cried, not wanting to talk to anyone, not even her parents.

However, after just one week, a week that Shanna said her mother spent not eating or sleeping, the Decker family found the peace and strength they needed. "We talked about it as a family, and we understood that we were not in control, that this was happening for a reason," Shanna remembers. "We said, 'Okay, Lord, take us where you need to take us.'"

That act of surrender changed everything. "We decided that we were going to enjoy living every day," says Shanna, now in college near her parents' Minnesota home. "While it was still difficult and scary after that point, the core fear that had gripped us seemed to disappear. The trust that I had in my parents and their trust in the Lord made it that much easier for me to accept what was going on." ▶

During Shanna's treatment, the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minnesota became a home away from home. "My mom worked at a bank, but she spent every day she could with me at the hospital," Shanna says. "My father came every night with my sister, and we had family dinner together in my hospital room; he would also stay on the weekend whenever he could get away from the business he ran. We definitely grew closer because there was



# ILY & FAITH

## Finding Strength During Childhood Cancer

By Phil Bolsta | Photos by Jessica Sauck

nobody else for us to go to except for our family and the Lord. Cancer is still our biggest bond. It's kind of fun."

While fun isn't the word most would use to describe cancer, Shanna explains that in addition to feeling closer to her family as a result of having the disease, she also enjoyed getting to know the other "cancer kids" during her hospital stays.

"We'd turn off the lights in the room and have one of the kids call a nurse in," she says. "We'd wait until she got a foot away, and then six of

us would jump up and cover her with Silly String. We'd also fill up big syringes of water and go soak the nurses while they sat at the front desk. We built forts, we put glitter all over things, and we'd stay up too late and watch movies. Even though we were sick, we enjoyed what we could."

That attitude helped Shanna cope with the painful side of cancer as well, including nine months of chemotherapy that made her feel like the doctors "were running poison through every part of my body." Three months after beginning chemo treatment, she endured a 12-hour surgical procedure called rotationplasty, in which her left knee was removed. Her lower leg was then rotated 180 degrees and reattached, thereby transforming her left foot into her left knee. "The surgery was a blessing," she says. "With a prosthetic leg, I have the opportunity to do almost anything I'd like to do."

After Shanna left the Mayo Clinic, it didn't take long for her to return, this time as an advocate for other

kids with cancer. "We would come in when a new kid was diagnosed with cancer," Shanna says. "My parents would talk to the parents, and I would play with the kids. I enjoyed being there, and that made the kids more comfortable. They knew I understood exactly how they felt. My family grew to appreciate those visits more and

more, the way that we could walk into a hospital room and see people crying, and then a few hours later leave them with a sense of hope. If we can make just one family

smile in a moment where they are in such heartache, that's worth it for us. It's about changing lives."

In the years since, Shanna has embraced public speaking, been featured in documentaries and was selected as one of three cancer patients whose story was featured in a special worldwide Mayo Clinic publication. Most importantly, she has made over 600 visits to cancer patients and amputees, most of whom were under 18. Many, if not most, of these encounters have led to lasting friendships. "My closest friends, besides the people I grew up with, are people that I have met through the cancer world," she says. "We always say it's a club that you never want to be a part of, but it's the best club you could ever be in."

Five years ago, Shanna started bringing new patients a gift box filled with items she picked out specifically for them. She calls those efforts 'Hearts of Hope.' "I always included a picture of myself and wrote a note on the back so that they knew that somebody who un-

I learned what it meant to really love other people and how to live every moment of life to the fullest.

## DESCRIPTION OF OSTEOSARCOMA:

Bone cancer is very rare. Around 2,000 cases are diagnosed in the United States each year. The most common type, accounting for 35 percent of bone cancer cases, is osteosarcoma, a tumor that develops from cells that form bone. Most often affected are the large bones in the lower extremity (femur and tibia) and the upper arm bone (humerus), but osteosarcoma can occur in any bone. Although most osteosarcomas begin in bone, a small percentage start in a non-bony area. These tumors are called extraskkeletal osteosarcomas. If the tumor is found in one location and has not spread to other parts of the body, the cure rate is 65 to 75 percent. Osteosarcoma is most prevalent in people between the ages of 10 and 30 but can occur at any age.

Mayo Clinic, "Osteosarcoma," Overview, <http://www.mayoclinic.org/osteosarcoma>.




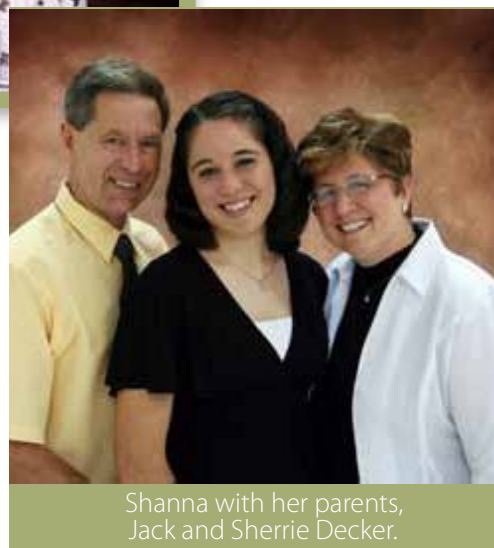
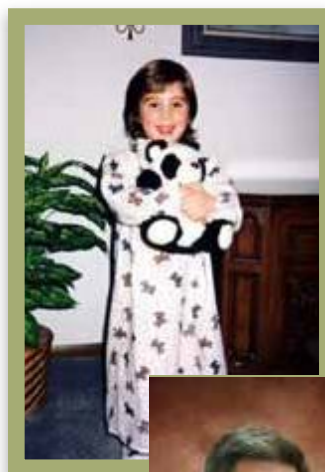
## DESCRIPTION OF THE TYPE OF ROTATIONPLASTY:

Typically used for young or athletic patients who have osteosarcoma near the knee joint, rotationplasty can allow a patient to run or walk with near-normal function. An orthopedic surgeon removes the tumor by cutting above and below the knee. The lower portion of the leg is rotated and reattached so that the ankle becomes the "knee." Specialists then fit the patient with a prosthetic ankle and foot.

Mayo Clinic, "Osteosarcoma," Treatment, [www.mayoclinic.org/osteosarcoma/treatment.html](http://www.mayoclinic.org/osteosarcoma/treatment.html).

derstood was always just a phone call or a short drive away," she says. "In future visits, I would see my picture hanging up in hospital rooms, because the patients would bring it with them every time they had treatment. There aren't even words to express how wonderful that is, to be providing hope even when I'm not in the room with someone."

At seven, Shanna didn't know if she would have a future. Today, she is very clear about what that future will look like. In addition to working with Brighter Tomorrows, she plans to start a non-profit organization to help families affected by childhood cancer. "Being given the opportunity to be a caregiver for so long has shaped the way I want my career to be," she says. "Cancer has given me a wonderful opportunity to help people and change lives. Cancer is the biggest blessing I have ever had in all of my life. I couldn't even imagine what my life would be without it. I learned what it meant to really love other people and how to live every moment of life to the fullest. I would say to anyone that their greatest turmoil or sorrow can be a blessing. God always works to the good of those who love Him. Not sometimes, but always." 



Shanna with her parents, Jack and Sherrie Decker.

## Phil Bolsta

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