

Web of Healing: A Children's Cancer Association Family uses CaringBridge to Connect and Receive Support

"I think my favorite part [of using CaringBridge] is reading encouraging notes that people leave us in the guestbook." – Shawna Farrar, Ramsey Farrar's mom

Watching the movie *Cars*, idolizing Goofy (the Disney character), and playing with siblings are a few of Ramsey Farrar's very serious, four-year-old hobbies. These seem like common activities for a four-year-old. However, unlike other kids, Ramsey, of Vancouver, Wash., has spent the past two years undergoing treatment for a life-threatening disease: acute lymphoblastic leukemia (ALL).

One day in February 2009, Ramsey started to feel ill and before long he had a temperature higher than 102 degrees. Joseph and Shawna Farrar, Ramsey's parents, took him to a series of doctor's visits during the course of a few days, and after several examinations, medical scans and a lot of pain for Ramsey, tests indicated that he had ALL.



ALL is a "liquid" tumor, or cancer of the blood, that starts in the bone marrow and spreads to the bloodstream. As the most common pediatric cancer, ALL accounts for 35 percent of all cancers in children. There are about 7,000 new cases in children and adolescents (birth to 21) in the United States each year.

Similar to other leukemia patients' parents, Ramsey's mom says that he has gone through "more than any little boy should have to go through." Ramsey began chemotherapy the day after he was diagnosed. He had surgery to put in his port, received a catheter twice, endured countless back and leg pokes, and even needed a feeding tube at one point. Ramsey continues to take chemo orally every day, once a month in his port, and once every three months in his spine.

Everything the Farrar family once knew changed when Ramsey was diagnosed with ALL. As Ramsey started his long journey through treatment, his mother Shawna



launched his CaringBridge web page after hearing about the site from their social worker at Emanuel Children's Hospital. What began as a wonderful way to let friends and family know how Ramsey was doing, without the pressure of having to make countless phone calls or send out a bunch of emails, became an even greater healing experience for Shawna. "Well, believe it or not I really look forward to doing this each night. It's sort of therapeutic for me," Shawna wrote only weeks after Ramsey's diagnosis.

Shawna was right. Studies have shown that typing your emotions, often called "therapeutic journaling," can help your psyche, which in turn can help you physically feel better. Shawna has found that her favorite part of CaringBridge is reading the encouraging notes from friends and family following Ramsey's fight. CaringBridge enables patients, family and friends to say things they might not be able to face-to-face.

During treatment, the Make-A-Wish Foundation granted Ramsey and his family a once-in-a-lifetime chance to visit Disneyland, spend time (even an airplane flight!) with Mickey Mouse and Goofy, and share time together away from the daily pressures of hospital visits, charts and constant worry. As Ramsey's father said, "Just being able to get away with the family and get away from the stresses that go along with your child having a life-threatening illness is amazing."

Ramsey and his family, among millions of others who chronicle the path of illness, treatment, recovery and survival on personal, secure CaringBridge websites, log the ups, the downs, what and who they are thankful for and what they are struggling to grapple with regularly online. Through online journaling, the Farrar's share words of prayer, words of love, gentle words of anger, words to comprehend, words of hope, and words of peace. Most importantly, they have learned that it is okay to feel a full range of emotions while they battle a disease together, and that there is a safe place to express their thoughts where others will understand, reply and empathize.

Today, Ramsey is two years into his journey with cancer, his prognosis is good, and his last treatment is scheduled for April 17, 2012.

CaringBridge sites are free and available for anyone facing a health challenge such as cancer. To create a site that gives recognition to the Children's Cancer Association, visit www.caringbridge.org/joyrx.