

Carmichael's Unlikely Hero

Written by Kyle West, Kansas media relations student assistant

It was the call Catherine Carmichael's mom, Janelle, had hoped she would never get again, let alone on the way home from holiday shopping with Catherine on Christmas Eve. The second Janelle answered the phone, Catherine knew something was wrong.

"We were driving home and the doctor called," Carmichael said. "Usually the doctor won't actually call you. Usually the nurse will call you, so when the doctor calls you, you know something's probably a little bit fishy. He asked, 'Janelle, are you sitting down?' so we pulled over. I knew what was going on. My mom started crying, and of course, I started crying."

After getting the bad news for the second time in five years, they continued home, unsure of how they would tell Jamison, one of Carmichael's three brothers, who was 16 at the time.

"We were on the way home," Carmichael explained. "My mom's crying and she said, 'I don't know how I'm going to tell him he has cancer again. How am I going to explain that to him? That his senior year of high school isn't going to be normal, the rest of his junior year isn't going to be normal, the rest of his life isn't going to be normal? How am I going to tell him that he has to do this again?'"

After arriving home, Carmichael's mom went downstairs to break the news to Jamison. After she told Jamison his biopsy had come back positive for cancer, he came upstairs where Carmichael was waiting.

"I remember he came upstairs and he wasn't even crying. He told me, 'I have to do it. I'm going to do it and I'm going to get through it. There's no reason to cry because I can't change it.'"

That constant positive attitude, even immediately after finding out he would have to beat cancer for the second time in five years, is one of the many reasons Carmichael considers Jamison her hero.

"I think his positive attitude breeds to everybody. I don't think that he ever really had a negative attitude going into it. I think there were times where he thought, 'Why me? Why am I here?' but that lasted a split second and he was back to being positive. Even when he was hurting he was never negative."

Jamison has been diagnosed with Hodgkin's lymphoma, a disease that abnormally enlarges cells in the lymph nodes. Jamison's mom, a P.E. teacher at Fort Riley, noticed the first lump on his neck when he was six years old.

"He was standing in line to go back to class," Carmichael said. "She put her hands on his neck and felt a bump. She took him to the doctor and they said they would take it out."

That first bump was non-cancerous. In fact, the first three were. Jamison had lumps removed from his neck twice and groin once before doctors discovered a cancerous growth when he was 13. That discovery had a significant impact on the whole family.

"That was the first time we ever had heard of Hodgkin's. It was a learning experience for all of us. Jamison didn't know what to expect. My mom didn't know what to expect. I didn't really know what it was or how serious it was. I always thought that if he had a bump, they would take it out. It never even crossed my mind that it could be cancerous. Any time I had

ever heard of anybody getting cancer, they died. In my mind I just connected cancer with dying. It was just so different because none of our family had ever had cancer."

However, not only did Jamison maintain a positive attitude throughout his treatment, he refused to let it affect his daily life.

"One day in the spring he wanted to go to open gym and my mom said 'You really can't. You have radiation today.' He went to radiation at 4 o' clock, came back and at 6:30 he was back playing at open gym."

After a series of chemotherapy and radiation treatments, Jamison won his first battle with cancer. Unfortunately, it would not be his last.

Last December, Jamison was playing basketball and was bothered by a lump in his groin that had been growing for a while. He asked his mom if they could remove it during winter break. His mom said that would be fine so the doctors removed it. That was what led to the phone call.

"They called on Christmas Eve and told my mom that they had found the lump was cancerous," said Carmichael. "It's one of those things where you thought it was gone and it came back. You're never really prepared but I think we all were a little more prepared for what was going to happen."

"My mom said, 'OK, here we go. We have to do it again.' I remember her telling Jamison, 'You have to promise me you're never going to give up.' He said, 'I'll never give up.'"

Jamison would go through chemotherapy and radiation treatment just like the first time. This time, though, he would require a bone marrow transplant after his final round of chemotherapy. The transplant took place on May 13, Carmichael's 19th birthday.

"I went on my birthday and I stayed with him in the hospital for a week and a half," Carmichael said. "It gets kind of tedious because you can only do so much. He was sick most of the time. He had mouth sores, but he's one of those people that doesn't like to complain, which is very rare. He was hoping he wouldn't lose his hair but he lost his hair again. It's just all those things where he could have been so negative, yet he chose to be so positive. That's why I look up to him so much. He had all kinds of stuff that he could have complained so much about but I never heard him complain. He just wanted to get it done and get out of there. That's one thing I really admire about him."

Jamison remained in the hospital for five weeks before he was allowed to return home. Even then, he had to stay largely in isolation, and he was not even allowed to shake people's hands. After two months, though, Jamison's bone density had returned to normal and he was ready to resume playing sports. He was only supposed to be an injured player on the football team, suiting up for the games but never leaving the sideline. Of course, Jamison wanted to do more than that and was practicing the week before the season began when he sprained his neck.

"He went out for a pass and came down on his neck," Carmichael said. "I'm like, 'This boy just can't catch a break.' It's one of those things where he won't ever let it stop him. Even though he knew he wasn't really supposed to be playing, he put himself in there and he wanted to play anyway."

Jamison's refusal to let cancer define what he can or can't do has left a lasting impression on his older sister.

"You realize that you thank God every day that you can get up and be healthy," said Carmichael. "I'm able to get up and go to practice every day. It's affected me in the way that I look at life completely differently now whereas before I would take things for granted. I used to say, 'Ugh, I have to go to practice,' but now I'm happy that I can get up and do those things because there are lots of people that don't get that chance."

Because of his unrelenting positive attitude and his effect on the way Carmichael views life, she does not hesitate when asked where Jamison ranks on her list of heroes.

"He is at the very, very top. I always say my mom is my role model and my little brother is my hero. My mom raised us from the time we were little so I look up to her for that. The fact that Jamison's gone through what he has, and he is still here and still has a positive attitude is remarkable. I think the fact that I can look up to him even though he is two years younger than me is amazing."

While Jamison may not go on to play sports at a Division I college like his two older siblings, Carmichael believes he has proven just as much about his character and determination as any Division I athlete.

"He'll never be able to go play a college sport somewhere, which is his dream," said Carmichael. "My older brother plays Division I basketball and I play Division I volleyball. Jamison has always been compared to my older brother, so he wanted to do something for himself and be able to play a sport, but I think he's come to terms with the fact that maybe he's not going to be able to. I wish that he could, but I think the fact that he's gone through this has made him stronger as a person. I think that's better than any sport could ever give you."