



'CANCER PICKED THE WRONG

8-year-old Viviann Snow will not let this grueling fight rob the smile from her face

Princess'

By Melissa Segrest

IT STARTED WITH A stomach bug that most everyone in the family got, around Christmas last year. Everyone got better, but 7-year-old Viviann Snow's stomach pain kept getting worse.

The Rosanky second-grader ended up in an emergency room. A scan showed a mass in her abdomen. A quick biopsy followed at Dell Children's Medical Center in Austin. On Jan. 29 of this year, a doctor told Kelsey Snow that her

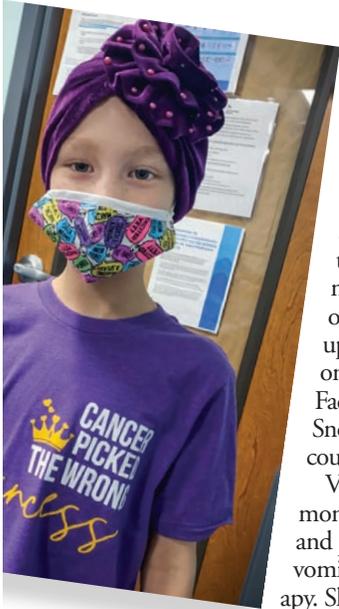
only child, her "sunshine in human form," had neuroblastoma, a rare form of childhood cancer. It was in the tumor and in her blood marrow.

A week later, oncologists at Dell Children's Blood & Cancer Center started chemotherapy. Vivi, as she's known by friends and family, was in the hospital for five days.

It was the start of a fight against a form of cancer that usually occurs in much younger children, often infants. As of late July, Viviann had received seven rounds of chemotherapy. Her treatment is led by Dr. Michael Mitchell at Dell. "He has been absolutely amazing throughout this whole thing," Kelsey Snow said.

By the second round of chemo, Viviann's long blonde hair had fallen out. She hated her "pork," her name for the port implanted near her rib cage where chemotherapy drugs

From far left: Viviani in an Easter dress in 2020; a touching portrait of Viviani with mother, Kelsey Snow, taken in April 2021, and Viviani in her purple princess T-shirt at a doctor's appointment in May. The statement T-shirts were sold as part of a fundraiser to cover costs of her treatment. (Portrait of mother and daughter by Brittany O'Brien of Wild Lovers Photography)



Bluebonnet is turning gold to spotlight Childhood Cancer Awareness Month

Bluebonnet Electric Cooperative's buildings, employees and even our trucks will be showing some gold in September to support Childhood Cancer Awareness Month.

At night, our member service centers in Bastrop, Brenham, Giddings, Lockhart and Manor will be bathed in gold light. If you see any Bluebonnet member service representatives, they'll be wearing gold ribbons and handing them out to members using any center's drive-through lanes. Look for gold ribbons on the doors of Bluebonnet service vehicles, too.

flow into her body. "She has had some challenging hospital stays, where the chemo hit her pretty badly," her mother said. "She had a bad reaction to one of the chemo drugs, and we ended up being in the hospital for 17 days one time. It just about broke her." Even FaceTime with her grandmother, Wanda Snow, and her beloved pug, Elvis Pugsley, couldn't boost her spirits at that time.

Viviani, it seems, is tough. In recent months, she's pushed through the nerve and joint pain as well as the nausea and vomiting that can come with chemotherapy. She has tolerated the daily shots that come after chemo, and the weekly check-

ups. Legos, Barbies and snuggles with mom to watch TikTok videos of pugs help.

Sometimes Viviani is reluctant to eat, leading to a self-prescribed, limited diet: Only spaghetti, then only Cinnamon Toast Crunch, then only McDonald's cheeseburgers. Or just homemade burgers or just chicken nuggets.

Cancer is hard for grown-ups to understand, much less a child. "This is a mistake. I don't feel like I have cancer. I feel like this medicine makes it worse," Viviani has cried to her mother. "When will my hair grow back?"

Kelsey Snow has gone from a well-organized working-mom life to a scrambled week-to-week existence. "It's been an adjustment," she said. A recent return to her job in Austin at the Seton Mind Institute behavioral sciences program helped restore some order.

Viviani gets support and transportation to medical appointments in Austin from her grandmother and her father, Matt Martin. Kelsey Snow's sister, Shannon Snow McGovern, has served as a sounding board, support system, meal provider and best friend.

Viviani recently had two days of specialized scans and other tests. "There is no more cancer in her bone marrow," her mother said happily in late July. The mass in Viviani's abdomen has shrunk, too, but it's not gone. Next up is an MRI and then complex surgery to remove the tumor, possibly at Texas Children's Hospital in Houston or Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center in New York. That will likely be followed by more treatments, possibly radiation, and then lengthy rounds of in-hospital stem cell therapy.

Family, friends, neighbors and even strangers in and near Rosanky, 13 miles southwest of Smithville, are stepping up to support Viviani, who turned 8 in June. Aunt Shannon and much-loved 6-year-old cousin, Riyann, are next-door neighbors. Grandmother Wanda lives with Viviani and Kelsey Snow. All live on Bastrop County land that has been in the family for generations.

CHILDHOOD CANCER BY THE NUMBERS

- 483,000 survivors of childhood cancer in the U.S. between 1975-2018
- 15,700 cases of childhood cancer in the U.S. each year
- 1,800 youth younger than 20 are diagnosed with cancer in Texas each year
- 83.5% of families with a child with cancer experience financial hardship
- 4 out of 5 children survive cancer

Sources: cancer.gov, acco.org, dellchildrens.net (statistics vary slightly)

Kelsey Snow has good health insurance, but the cost of Viviani's treatments are astronomical, she said. Family and friends organized fundraisers and more are planned, including an October music event featuring local talent and perhaps a high-wattage country star.

"The amount of support has blown me away," Kelsey Snow said. "I'll see people I don't even know wearing purple 'Cancer Picked the Wrong Princess' T-shirts," which were sold as part of a fundraiser for Viviani. Cousins and family friends created Vivi's Villagers benefit fund because "it takes a village." Donations can be made at any First National Bank of Bastrop or via the Venmo money transfer app to @Vivis-Villagers. Keep up with fundraisers and activities at facebook.com/vivisvillage.

Kelsey Snow balances loving care with firm consistency. "I tell her: 'It's OK to be sad. We're going to have a few minutes to have some cry time, to feel our feelings, and then we're going to stand up and we're going to keep going,'" she said.

"Ever since she was little, anywhere we would go it would take twice as long as it should because Vivi would talk to everybody, always smiling, always happy, making jokes and meeting people," her mother said.

"She still has the smile. I don't know how she does it. Kids are resilient. And she is a fighter, for sure." ■

5 COMMON CHILDHOOD CANCERS

LEUKEMIAS, 28% — Cancers of bone marrow and blood

BRAIN, CENTRAL NERVOUS SYSTEM TUMORS, 26% — About 1 in 4 cancers in children; 4,000+ diagnosed yearly

LYMPHOMAS, 3% HODGKIN AND 5% NON-HODGKIN — formed in lymph system, including lymph nodes, spleen, thymus, bone marrow or tonsils

NEUROBLASTOMA, 6% — Most common in children younger than 1 year; about 700 cases diagnosed yearly

WILMS' TUMOR, 5% — In kidneys, most common in young children; under 500 cases diagnosed annually in U.S.

Sources: cancer.gov, cancer.org

Get information about organizations that support kids with cancer and Ronald McDonald House charities online at bluebonnet.coop/TCP.