

September 18th: Tracy's Story, written by Tracy Stauffer, PCFLV's Marketing and Community Relations Coordinator

I am lucky. I have an amazing husband, two great daughters, a home, a car, a terrific extended family, great friends and a job.

I am unlucky because my younger daughter, Vanessa, has cancer. That one statement, my daughter has cancer, is the cause of these next few sentences. I don't sleep well (and haven't for the eleven years that we have been in this pediatric cancer "club"). I spent the better part of nine months in the hospital at the beginning of this journey ... away from my other daughter and my husband. I lost friends who didn't want to hear about the daily trials and tribulations of having a child with cancer. I am certain that some of my gray hair is from worrying. I could drive to CHOP with my eyes closed (and I may have done that one or two times). I could go on, but that is not what I choose to focus on.

In total honesty, I often "fake it to make it." At times, my smile is plastered on. I still cry in the shower some mornings. I continually ask the Powers That Be to keep Vanessa's cancer stable. Sometimes I drink one too many Cosmos. Sometimes I lose myself in tv, alone and with all of the blinds drawn. Denial is a huge part of my world. And I am okay with all of that ... even the sleepless nights. Because, first of all, Vanessa is still here. My husband and I get to hug her each morning and kiss her good night each evening. We get to see her grow, laugh and learn. That is more than many other pediatric cancer families get to do. And, as much as our family has lost from cancer, we have gained.

What? Gained? Yes, we did gain a lot. We made tremendous new friends who wanted to hear our stories. We instantly appreciated all that we had and have. We stopped sweating the small stuff. We grew closer as an immediate family and with our extended family. We are quicker to laugh and smile. We are so much more "in the moment" than we were before. And we were introduced to PCFLV.

We were reluctant to attend our first PCFLV function, but we are so glad that we went. The welcoming of the other families was instant. Wow ... a tent filled with other cancer moms was incredible. The love and compassion was palpable. Sure, our kids loved being with the other kids, and my husband enjoyed meeting and talking with the other dads. But it really was a blessing for me. I was at a very low point in our journey. We had received bad news after putting Vanessa through hell. The words "quality of life" were said, and I was scared and borderline crazy with worry. But that wonderful bond with PCFLV and other families continued after that first event. I began to do things with other PCFLV moms, both official events and things like coffee and sweets at the diner. We did yoga each week. And I started to feel "okay" again. Hope was returning, as was my sanity. And Vanessa's cancer stabilized.

I began to volunteer for PCFLV and was on the committee that created the first 8k run/5k walk. I assisted with the Gala (when it was called The Color My World Gala). It felt great to help other families, while also helping my own. Long story short ... they hired me as the Marketing and Community Relations Coordinator. I handle marketing, advertising, social media, fundraising and more. To be able to work at the place that I truly believed saved me from darkness, is fulfilling

beyond words. I can talk to new families as a cancer mom. I can help PCFLV raise money to spend on much-needed programs. I believe in what I do.

So, do I consider myself lucky or unlucky? Definitely lucky.