

# Turning Negative into Positive

## Teen cancer patient raises \$20,000 in relay.

BY BONNIE HOBBS  
CENTRE VIEW

**A**rising senior at Chantilly High, Nikki Ferraro raised \$20,000 for the American Cancer Society and participated in the June 19-20 Relay for Life at Madison High in Vienna. For her, though, it was personal, since she's waging her own battle against a rare form of thyroid cancer.

"It's crazy to think that millions of people will be diagnosed with cancer this year, and I never in a million years thought I'd be one of them," said Nikki, 17 1/2. "I wanted to take all that's happened to me and make it into as positive a situation, as possible." So she started a Relay for Life team and raised money toward a cure.

Outgoing and athletic, Nikki loves singing and music, is a member of DECA, takes leadership classes and is involved in the Christian youth group, Young Life. But a stiff neck and shoulder led to the discovery of a painful lymph node on her right collarbone, above the shoulder, and she soon also entered the world of doctors, hospitals, lab tests and an unwanted diagnosis.

"An ultrasound, March 24, revealed a nodule on her thyroid and enlarged lymph nodes to the right side of the thyroid," said her mom, Sharon, of Chantilly's Armfield Farm community. "Then, after a fine-needle biopsy, April 6, the doctor said, 'I'm sorry to tell you, your daughter has thyroid cancer — and an extremely rare form, medullary — only 5 percent of thyroid-cancer patients have it.'"

Regular thyroid cancer, explained Sharon Ferraro, responds successfully to treatment. "But medullary c-cells live in between thyroid cells, move around and can get to lymph nodes — and, from there, to the liver, lungs and bones," she said. "So right now, other than surgery, there's no treatment for it. There are clinical trials of medicines, but radiation and chemotherapy don't help."

Nikki even met recently with a researcher at NIH because it's also rare for this, particular disease to happen in a child or teen. Her type of thyroid cancer is slower-moving than other types; however, it already spread to her lymph nodes. So on May 17, surgery at Johns Hopkins removed the thyroid and cancerous lymph nodes,

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Sharon Ferraro, Nikki Ferraro, and Michael Ferraro.

plus some cancer on her trachea.

Furthermore, said Ferraro, "Doctors also had to remove a nerve running between her neck and right shoulder, plus a nerve to the right vocal chord, so she currently has a hoarse voice. Specialists say it's not as bad as it could be, and we're going to consider some possible measures to improve her voice."

"We're happy and blessed that she's gone as far as she has," continued Ferraro. "Nicole still has

some microscopic cells that could remain dormant or grow; we don't know. But these c-cells produce a chemical called calcitonin and its level can be monitored with monthly blood tests."

**WHEN NIKKI** was first diagnosed, said her mom, "I kept thinking, 'This can't beat us; we have to get through this.'" She still feels the same. "We have a strong faith, and I told Nicole we'd save her and

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Back row, from left: Julianne Holmblad, Nikki Ferraro, Sarah Dunaye, Shannon Reeves, Samantha Small, and Gabby Snedeker. Front row, from left: Casie Morton, Monica Vuong, and Tania Bordcosh.

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God would guide us through this and make her stronger. Maybe she'll even help others."

One way she's doing it is via her Relay for Life team named "Bite Me, Cancer." She channeled her friends' support for her into support for the team, comprised of some 25 Chantilly High students. Nikki designed motivational T-shirts and bracelets, and students in her leadership and marketing classes made posters and helped sell the T-shirts.

"I've been very impressed with Nicole's attitude, courage and leadership," said her dad, Michael Ferraro. "She never was down on herself or her situation, and she inspired her friends, family and community to support her and her relay team. For her to raise \$20,000 for the American Cancer Society was an outstanding achievement. Not only were we impressed; the American Cancer Society and the other Relay teams were in awe of her accomplishments."

"She's an inspiration to us — she's so focused and positive," added her mom. "The other night, she told

me, 'I know I have this cancer thing, but I'm really happy.' That's because she loves her friends and feels good about herself. The people she cares about care about her."

"I know we're not guaranteed anything, but she's still having fun," continued Sharon Ferraro. "She still sings; it's just different. New things are discovered every day, so you never know what'll happen."

Meanwhile, Nikki remains cheerful and upbeat — and grateful for the love and support of family and friends. "They're the ones who've kept me strong and positive through all of this," she said. "I love each and every one of [my relay teammates] and appreciate them so much for everything they've done for me, whether talking to me about my cancer, praying for me and my family or bringing me cupcakes or balloons."

On her relay Web site, she thanked everyone. "You guys are what gives people like me happiness, hope and joy," wrote Nikki. "Together we have the power to help create a world where cancer can no longer claim another year of anyone's life."