

Survival and Hope Life After Cancer



**AURORA "OLIVIA" CABRERA, 25
DIAGNOSIS: PAPILLARY
THYROID CARCINOMA**

The Basics:

- **RESIDENCE:** Hesperia
- **OCCUPATION:** College AVID tutor at Hesperia High School
- **FAMILY:** Benjamin Isaac, 5, son; Noelle Pauline, 2, daughter; Pauline Ruiz, mother; Aurora Sanchez, grandmother; Cabrera's five siblings, "the Ruiz children"
- **HOBBIES:** Likes to bake, crochet blankets, studied flute.
- **PHILOSOPHY:** They can take away anything from me - my thyroid, my tonsils, but they can't take away my wisdom and education.

By Alberta Hale Crigler

Aurora Olivia Cabrera has spent much of her lifetime battling illnesses.

The 25-year-old's medical journey started when she was a young teenager and she began having unexplained seizures.

Cabrera said a pediatrician even accused her of being a "pathological liar," and that her seizures were "faked."

But, Cabrera said, when she was about 14 years old, a brain scan revealed a dime-sized spot on her brain and she was diagnosed with epilepsy.



Then, in 2012, new symptoms appeared and doctors once again were questioning their cause.

"I ended up being transferred to Arrowhead Regional Center," Cabrera said. "I was partially paralyzed on my left side. They thought I was a hypochondriac and nothing was wrong with me, or possibly I was on drugs."

But Cabrera insisted something was actually wrong.

"They did an ultrasound and found a mass on my thyroid" she said. I ended up being hospitalized for a couple of days.

"I came back the next week for a biopsy. Three days later, on April 20, 2012, I was diagnosed with papillary thyroid cancer."

Eventually she was referred to Loma Linda University Health. "It was about three to four months for my insurance to approve surgery at Loma Linda," she said.

She had a thyroidectomy in September 2012. Three days after her surgery, Cabrera found out she was pregnant, and she postponed further treatment until her son was born in May 2013.

At that time, her blood work did not show any cancer markers, and no further treatment was done.

But the following year, around June or July 2014, bloodwork revealed the cancer had come back.

Cabrera was treated with oral radiation therapy. Several days after her treatment, she became extremely ill from side effects of radiation and was hospitalized for nearly a month.

Since then, Cabrera has found herself plagued with illnesses due to her body's failure to absorb medications that substitute for the thyroid's function of maintaining proper calcium, potassium, and other levels in her body.

After her thyroid was removed, Cabrera said she was in the hospital "four to five times per week. I have been bounced around from doctor to doctor for the past four years."

But now, Cabrera has an endocrinologist who has placed her on additional medications that are more effective, and who is investigating whether her illnesses are related. "I finally have a successful team that is trying to work hard and not working separately - they are sharing notes with each other. Everything is together so nothing is left out."



"I have been bounced around from doctor to doctor for the past four years."

"On Oct. 8, 2018, I went for a full-body scan, and was told right there and then that I was officially cancer-free."

Cabrera said her cancer diagnosis "affected my family a lot."

"When I was diagnosed with cancer, I thought, 'I really can't do this. I will never be the normal person everyone wants me to be.'"

"My grandpa, Apolonio Sanchez, was my best friend. He died in 2007. He was the one I talked to. He was there when I first started getting sick when I was 13 years old. He started the journey with me, but I had to finish it."

In spite of her illnesses, Cabrera pursued her education. "I had books or my laptop with me almost all the time at the hospital," she said.

"I missed so much school from epilepsy," she said. "I graduated high school 2011. I went forward and got my associate's degree in Social Psychology at Barstow Community College. I graduated in 2015 after being told I would never graduate."

"In 2019, I will have a BS in Social Psychology, with a minor in Social Work and a certificate in Human Resources."

For newly diagnosed cancer patients, Cabrera says: "Reach out to your community for resources. 'I was just going to give up. If it wasn't for my mom pushing me ... I went to more doctors until we got the approval for Loma Linda.'"

Caregiver Perspective



"A cancer diagnosis - it is a memory that never goes away," said Pauline Ruiz, Olivia Cabrera's mother.

Pauline said she gave her daughter "support and I told her she couldn't give up. Olivia questioned a lot: 'Why, God?'"

"I would tell her: 'Sometimes it is out of our control, and there is nothing we can do except go through it.'"

"When anything went wrong, she ended up in the hospital."

"It is very hard, but I have kind of adjusted to where we go minute by minute. She is a very strong woman."

"My thing is: Don't give up, there is no need to give up; you can't."



The American Cancer Society provides a 24 hour service to answer questions about diagnosis, insurance, local support and resources

**www.cancer.org or
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Q WHAT DOES SKIN CANCER LOOK LIKE ?

A The skin cancer which occurs most commonly is basal cell carcinoma. It may appear as a non-healing sore or bump on the skin. These should be diagnosed and treated early as their continued growth makes treatment more difficult. If you have any questions about a possible skin cancer, be sure to consult a Board Certified Dermatologist.

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