

MORE THAN A DIAGNOSIS

FLETCHER KENDALL



Erin Kendall, Fletcher's mom, shared Fletcher's story with us as part of our *More Than a Diagnosis* series.

JUST BEING FLETCHER

Fletcher has never met a stranger.

He talks. A lot.

He is joyful, funny, friendly and almost always on the move. And he is probably at his happiest with a baseball or a football in his hands. It doesn't really matter what kind of ball. Baseball, football, soccer —Fletcher loves sports, competition and being outside. He is the kind of kid who wants to play, wants to compete and, naturally, wants to win.



That competitive spirit would become an unexpected part of his cancer journey. But first, Fletcher was simply being Fletcher.

WHEN SOMETHING DIDN'T SEEM RIGHT

Fletcher was seven years old and in the last week of first grade when his family began noticing that something wasn't quite right.

Around February 2024, he began coming home from school and falling asleep on the couch. He hadn't napped since he was a toddler, so his parents noticed the change, but it didn't immediately seem alarming. Maybe he was going through a growth spurt. Maybe he was simply tired from being busy.

Then there was the limp.

At baseball practice, Fletcher began limping as he ran the bases. His parents wondered if his cleats were causing the problem, so they bought him new ones. But when asked what was wrong, Fletcher would simply say, "My ankle is sore." First one ankle, then the other.

Fletcher's mother, Erin reached out to her dad, an orthopedic surgeon in Laurinburg, North Carolina, asking if Fletcher could have sprained his ankle, but kids that age have such flexibility that ankle sprains are uncommon. Instead, Erin's dad suggested that Fletcher could have a growth plate injury. An orthopedic evaluation and X-rays didn't show anything. Still, something wasn't right. Fletcher was even beginning to resist going to baseball games, which was completely unlike him.

His parents were confused. There was no obvious illness. No dramatic symptoms. Just a collection of little things that didn't quite make sense.

Looking back, Erin realized how difficult it had been for Fletcher to explain what was happening. A seven-year-old doesn't necessarily have the words to say, "I'm unusually fatigued," or "Something about my body feels different." Fletcher could only say his ankle hurt or that he needed a nap.

THE DIAGNOSIS

Then came the school fun run.

Fletcher participated in the one-mile event, but instead of running—as his competitive nature would normally demand—he walked nearly the entire way. Friends noticed. The school nurse noticed. Something was wrong.

The next morning, his parents noticed that Fletcher looked yellow. They called Erin's dad, who advised them to take him to the emergency room.

They headed to Children's Healthcare of Atlanta thinking they were taking their tired, limping seven-year-old to find out how he had injured himself.

Instead, they were about to learn that Fletcher had cancer.

The emergency room physician took one look at him and pulled Erin aside.

"This isn't going to be good, but we're so glad you brought him in."

The bloodwork confirmed what no parent ever expects to hear: Fletcher had leukemia.

For Erin, the moment was almost impossible to process. She describes feeling completely

stunned—almost as though she had left her own body. There was no time to stop and figure out how to feel. There was only the next question: *What's next?*

Fletcher went directly from the emergency room to the oncology floor at Children's Healthcare of Atlanta. Within hours, the family went from wondering why their seven-year-old was limping to watching a medical team begin fighting to save his life.



“It was a whirlwind,” Erin remembers. And yet, through it all, Fletcher remained Fletcher.

A SEVEN-YEAR-OLD'S RESILIENCE

Doctors had told Erin something she would remember throughout the journey: children in Fletcher's age group—roughly seven to ten years old—can be remarkably resilient during cancer treatment. They are old enough to understand some of what is happening, but still young enough to possess a certain buoyancy. They often roll with things in a way that older children may struggle to do.

Fletcher seemed to embody that resilience.

He stayed on his baseball team throughout treatment. Even though he had a port, his doctors determined that baseball was a safe, low-contact activity for him. Even on days when he was too sick to play, he wanted to be there. He wanted to watch his team. He wanted to be around his friends.

He wanted to keep being a kid.

And when cancer forced him to do things no seven-year-old should have to do, Fletcher often found a way to turn them into a game.

He had numerous spinal taps during treatment—about 18 in all. Because chemotherapy was administered into his spine as part of his treatment, he was sedated for the procedures.



Fletcher, however, had a different idea about what should happen when the sedation began.

Every time the nurses told him the “sleepy medicine” was going in, Fletcher would start counting. He wanted to see how high he could get before the anesthesia took effect. Sometimes he counted in Spanish because he was learning the language.

His mom would record him. And then, inevitably, Fletcher would fall asleep mid-count. When he woke up, he would ask, “How high did I get?” Of course, Fletcher was convinced he could beat the anesthesia. It was classic Fletcher: faced with something he didn't want to do, he figured out how to turn it into a game—a competition of sorts.

WHEN CANCER CHANGES A FAMILY

Cancer changed the rhythm of the entire family.

Fletcher's first month of treatment—the induction phase—was particularly difficult. The chemotherapy was intense, and he became very sick. His older sister, Adelaide, was 10 at the time.

Knowing those first weeks could be especially difficult and not knowing exactly what life with cancer would look like, the family made arrangements for Adelaide to spend time with her cousins in Richmond.

Meanwhile, Erin stepped away from her job and became Fletcher's primary caregiver. Her days revolved around him.

The family was fortunate to have an extraordinary support system. Erin's parents essentially moved in, taking turns helping with Adelaide, driving, sitting through clinic visits and taking care of the things that simply could not be a priority for Erin and her husband.

Friends showed up, too.

Meals appeared. Her freezer stayed full. One friend would bring Fletcher's best friend to the house when he wanted company so the boys could sit side-by-side, build Legos and watch television.

Those seemingly ordinary moments mattered.



Adelaide, too, handled an incredibly difficult situation with remarkable maturity. She understood that Fletcher needed more attention, and she trusted her parents when they told her that she had not been forgotten. Erin believes the experience may have accelerated the emotional maturity that was already part of Adelaide's personality.

FINDING NORMAL AGAIN

For Fletcher's family, normal has always looked pretty simple.

They are huge Braves fans and enjoy going to sporting events around Atlanta.



They walk their dog, Pepper. They ride bikes. They spend weekends on soccer and baseball fields. They have movie nights.

They are busy. They are active. They are a family on the go.

Cancer interrupted that life, but it never completely erased it.

WHAT FLETCHER TAUGHT HIS FAMILY

There is one lesson Erin says she will carry with her long after treatment ends: Fletcher rarely complained.

That doesn't mean he never had difficult moments. He did. But watching a seven-year-old learn to swallow handfuls of pills, endure procedures, cope with chemotherapy and keep going changed his family's perspective on what really matters.

The little things stopped mattering quite so much.

“If it's not life or death, it's really hard for me to spend time dwelling or complaining about something.”

Erin, Fletcher's mom

Fletcher taught his family that—not through a grand speech or some profound declaration, but simply by continuing to be himself.

THE END OF TREATMENT

Fletcher was seven years old and in the last week of first grade when he was diagnosed with leukemia.

He is now nine years old, has just started fourth grade, and in mid-August, Fletcher rang the End of Treatment bell at Children's Healthcare of Atlanta.

For Fletcher, moving forward means exactly that: moving forward.



His mom wants him to move forward and not dwell on the cancer. She wants him to take the lessons he can from this experience and live the childhood he deserves. If, someday, he wants to return to the hospital to volunteer, meet a child going through treatment or become involved in the childhood cancer community, she will support him. But it will be his choice.

For Erin, moving forward looks a little different.

CARRYING IT FORWARD

This experience has connected Erin to a community she never expected to join—and one she doesn't intend to leave.

During Fletcher's treatment, organizations supporting children with cancer and their families

became an important part of their lives. Now that Fletcher has finished treatment, Erin has chosen to give back by volunteering with two organizations that were meaningful to their family: the Rally Foundation and Blood Cancer United.

She knows what it feels like to sit on the other side of the diagnosis.

She knows what it means when someone says, *I'm here. Tell me what you need.*

And she wants to be that person for another family.

In that way, Erin is carrying forward the support her family received—including the kind of support offered through organizations like Live Like Madison that exist to help children and families facing childhood cancer.

For Fletcher, the goal is to move forward.

For Erin, it is to carry the experience forward.

Because there is still work to be done.

“FOR IT NOT TO HAPPEN”

When Erin was asked what she wants the future to look like for children facing cancer, her answer came quickly.

“For it not to happen.”

She doesn't mean simply that she wants children to survive.

She wants a world where children don't have to endure cancer in the first place.

And until that day comes, she believes there is much more work to do in the area of childhood cancer.

Fletcher was fortunate to have a diagnosis with a high likelihood of survival. Erin remembers sitting in the hospital after learning he had blood cancer and hearing that if testing confirmed B-cell acute lymphoblastic leukemia, his chances of survival were around 95 percent.

That became their hope.

And it became a reminder of just how much research matters.

Because Erin couldn't stop thinking about the other families sitting in those same hospital rooms who don't hear those numbers.

Every child deserves a diagnosis that comes with a roadmap to a cure.

They all deserve a cure.

That is what Erin hopes the future will bring: more research, better treatments, fewer side effects and ultimately, a cure for every childhood cancer.

A NEW CHAPTER

Fletcher's story is a story about leukemia.

But it is also a story about a boy who has never met a stranger. A boy who talks and talks and talks, just like his grandfather, Pop. A boy who is happiest with a ball in his hand and a game in front of him. A boy who kept baseball in his life even while going through cancer treatment. A boy who turned 18 spinal taps into a competition with anesthesia. A boy who learned to swallow handfuls of pills before most children his age would ever think about

taking one. A boy who rarely complained. A boy who kept going.

And now, a boy who has rung the End of Treatment bell.

Fletcher was seven years old, in the last week of first grade, when cancer interrupted his childhood. Today, he is nine, has just started fourth grade, and is beginning a new chapter.

There are no guarantees about what the future holds. But for now, there is baseball. There are Braves games.

There are bike rides and weekends on soccer fields. There is a dog named Pepper. There are friends and family. There is fourth grade. There is childhood.

And there is a little boy who gets to keep being exactly who he has always been.



Fletcher is more than his diagnosis.

He is a competitor, a storyteller, a sports lover, and a boy who keeps moving forward.



His story is still being written.

EVERY CHILD HAS A STORY.

More Than a Diagnosis

Live Like
MADISON