

MORE THAN A DIAGNOSIS

MADISON FEDAK

Before there was Live Like Madison, there was Madison.



Many people know her story. For others, this may be the first time they are hearing it. Madison was so much more than her diagnosis. She was a daughter, a sister, a friend, a student, and a little girl who left an enormous mark on the people who knew and loved her.

Her mom, Laura, shares Madison's story in her own words.

A LITTLE GIRL WITH AN OLD SOUL

Before cancer entered her life, Madison was a shy little girl. She was a true “momma’s girl” who didn’t venture out much to talk to people she didn’t know. But once she knew you, she loved you—and she loved deeply.

Madison was creative and loved anything that allowed her imagination to run wild. She made slime, played Barbies, and even created her own YouTube channel—or at least pretended to. She loved telling jokes, too. In fact, one of her favorite things to do at school was to come up with a better joke than her teachers. They loved making each other laugh.

Jokes could always make Madison laugh. She even entered her school talent show one year simply to tell jokes. She loved crazy animal videos on YouTube and would sit and giggle. She also laughed hysterically when she was being tickled or chased.

There was something special about Madison that went beyond her playful personality. Laura describes her as having an “old soul.”

“She just got people,” Laura says. “She knew how to read them and was in tune to how people felt.”

Family time was important to Madison. The family vacationed often simply to spend time together. The beach was her favorite, although she was beginning to fall in love with the mountains and skiing, too.



WHEN EVERYTHING CHANGED

In the months before Madison's diagnosis, Laura was simply watching her 5-year-old little girl grow up. Madison was becoming more independent and becoming her own person. She and her sister, Riley, loved playing together, and Laura enjoyed watching their relationship grow.

Then, around Easter, Laura noticed that Madison had a slight limp. She remembers noticing it during an Easter egg hunt. Later, Madison's uncle grabbed Madison's leg to tickle her, and Madison screamed. She hadn't complained about the pain, but Laura could see the worry on her face.

Three days later, everything changed. Madison couldn't stand up to walk to the bathroom, and the family rushed her to the hospital in the middle of the night.

Soon, Laura and her family heard the words no parent ever wants to hear: their child had cancer. "It was surreal; like a nightmare," Laura remembers.

At first, she didn't fully understand what was happening. At the hospital, an ER nurse asked the family to step into another room because the doctor wanted to talk to them. Laura remembers thinking that if it were something simple, they would have told them in front of Madison.

When Madison was transported to Atrium Health Levine Children's Hospital, they were still unsure of what was happening. Then they arrived on the 11th floor. As they stepped off the elevator, Laura saw a poster of a little girl without hair and the word "oncology." "That was when it hit me that this was going to be the start of something really bad."



TRYING TO KEEP LIFE NORMAL

One of Laura's biggest challenges in those first days and weeks was trying to keep life as normal as possible for Madison.

She was supposed to be enjoying Spring Break. Instead, she had two IVs and had been put to sleep three times for scans, biopsies and a port placement. Visitors came bearing toys to keep her occupied. But when everyone left and the hospital became quiet, Madison wanted to know what was happening. "It was hard to give her an answer when I wasn't really sure myself."

Looking back, Laura wishes she could go back to those early days with the knowledge she has now. She wishes she had known how Madison's story would end. No parent wants to know that their child is going to die. Laura was optimistic. She never imagined a life without Madison, and because she believed her daughter would survive, she continued trying to balance being Madison's mom with her career as a teacher. She remembers sitting in the hospital trying to grade papers and plan lessons. There were times when Madison wanted to play Barbies or work on crafts, but Laura had schoolwork to do. "What I would give to go back and make sure that I never said 'no' to her."



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-Laura, Madison's mom

A FAMILY DIVIDED BY CANCER

Cancer didn't just change Madison's life. It changed the entire family. Almost immediately, the family became two separate families. Mickey stayed in Laurinburg with Riley while Laura stayed in Charlotte with Madison. They would leave Thursday morning and not return until Sunday or Monday, only to pack up again and leave a few days later.

Laura missed an entire year of watching Riley grow up. Mickey, Madison's dad, missed a year of seeing Madison. And perhaps hardest of all, Riley and Madison missed a year of being sisters.

The emotional toll of cancer was something Laura hadn't fully understood before becoming a caretaker. She had heard about the side effects of chemotherapy and radiation, but knowing about them and witnessing them firsthand were two very different things.

She watched Madison's hair fall out and saw the emotional toll that took on her. Madison wondered why people called her a boy or looked at her with sympathy. Laura held her daughter while she vomited and dry heaved. She watched as Madison struggled with nosebleeds and painful mouth sores. There were times when she couldn't even brush her teeth because of severe ulcers.

And then there was the exhaustion and frustration. Madison simply wanted to be a normal little girl like her friends. She was only five. And after everything her body endured, she still wanted to play.



SISTERS WHO JUST WANTED TO BE TOGETHER

Riley, Madison's sister, visited Madison as often as she could, but the hospital was difficult for both girls. Madison was attached to an IV pole throughout her stays, limiting where she could go. Riley wanted to explore Charlotte and experience something beyond the hospital walls. Madison would light up when Riley arrived. But when the chemotherapy began, Madison was often too sick and too tired to play. "It crushed both of them."

Through all of it, their family was surrounded by support. Friends and family prayed for Madison. They called, texted, visited and found ways to let the family know they were thinking about them. Knowing that their entire community was rallying behind Madison gave Laura tremendous encouragement.



Even after Madison's death, that support has continued. Laura still receives unexpected texts from friends simply saying they are thinking about her. Sometimes someone sends her a picture of a pink sky or a flamingo. Those small reminders still mean so much.

THE MOMENTS THAT CANCER CAN'T TAKE AWAY

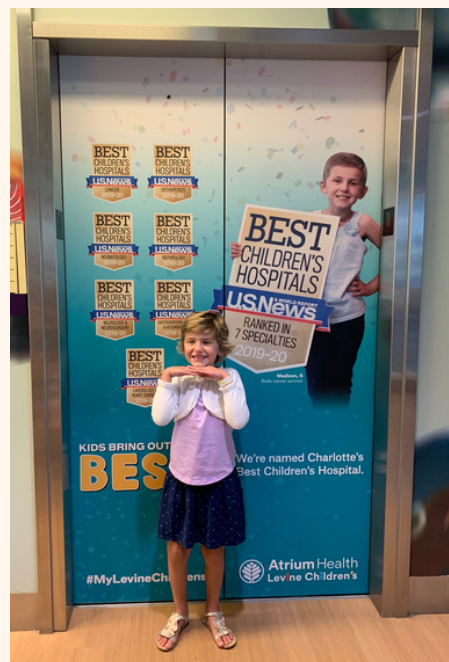
Cancer is ugly, and it takes so much. But Laura also recognizes that it gave her and Madison something they might otherwise have overlooked: time together. Cancer forced them to slow down.

There are countless memories from that time, but one in particular still makes Laura smile. One day, while they were driving back to the hospital, Laura looked up and saw a billboard featuring Madison. When Madison saw her own face, she lit up. After they were admitted and moved to LCH 11, Madison discovered that she was also featured on the elevator doors. Four days later, as they were heading back to Laurinburg, a transit bus passed by with Madison's face on the side. Madison looked at her mom and said, very matter-of-factly, "Well, Mom, I guess I'm kind of a big deal now." That was Madison.

She also loved playing pranks—especially on her nurses. One day, Madison had received a Minion "fart gun" and decided to put it to use. She told her attending nurse that her tummy hurt from all the medicine. When the nurse came over to inspect her belly, Madison pushed the button. The nurse was horrified. Madison thought it was hilarious. She laughed so hard she could barely catch her breath, and eventually she and her attending nurse teamed up to prank several other nurses. Those moments of laughter were precious.

"Well, Mom, I guess I'm kind of a big deal now."

-Madison



THE KINDNESS THAT MADE MADISON FEEL NORMAL

Laura says there are too many people who made a lasting difference to name just one. But one thing stands out: people continued to show up.

Madison worried that people might stay away because they were afraid of “catching cancer.” That made every visit to the hospital and every visit to their home especially meaningful.

Madison loved company. When people came to see her, it lifted her spirits more than anything else. Those visits helped her feel like herself. Like a little girl. Like Madison.



WHAT MADISON TAUGHT HER MOM

If there is one word Laura would use to describe what Madison taught her, it is courage.

Courage, Laura says, isn't necessarily the absence of fear. It is the determination to keep going despite the fear. Madison was scared. She never talked about what would happen if the medicine didn't work. She never talked about dying or Heaven. She never asked if she would survive. But near the end of her life, Laura believes Madison knew. One day, when a doctor called Laura out of the room, a barely 7 year-old Madison looked at her grandmother and said, "Meemaw, it's bad." She knew her body. She knew something was wrong. But she didn't want to talk about it. She just wanted to live.

To Laura, Madison will forever be the strongest person she has ever known. "She didn't let cancer define her." Madison showed her mom that life, no matter how short, can still be a beautiful adventure—as long as you are willing to live it.

***"She didn't let
cancer define
her."***

-Laura, Madison's mom



LEARNING TO MOVE FORWARD WITHOUT LEAVING MADISON BEHIND

For Laura, moving forward has never meant moving on from Madison. “In our hearts, we will always be a family of four,” she says. “But on the outside, we have an empty seat at the table.”

She describes the difficulty of making plans after losing a child. Imagine booking a vacation and selecting “one child” instead of two. Imagine signing a Christmas card and wondering whether to write both children’s names when one of them is no longer there to sign her own. The first time Laura saw a photograph of Mickey, Riley and herself without Madison, she felt guilty. It felt like they were moving forward—and she didn’t want to leave Madison behind.



Today, Laura moves forward every day for Riley, because Riley deserves that life. But Madison is still part of their family. They talk about her. Flamingos bring smiles, and they take those moments as signs that Madison is still near. Laura calls them her “God winks”—little reminders that Madison lived her life and that her story continues to inspire others.

HOPE HAS A NAME

For Laura and her family, hope is Live Like Madison. It is the promise she made to her daughter. It is the hope that the work being done in Madison's memory will help find a cure. It is the hope of providing other families facing a childhood cancer diagnosis with something every family deserves: Hope.

Madison's story is not simply a story about cancer. It is a story about a little girl who loved crafts, jokes, Barbies, beaches, her family and making people laugh. It is a story about a daughter and a sister who was deeply loved. It is a story about courage.

And it is a story about what happens when a child's life ends far too soon—but her impact doesn't.

Before there was Live Like Madison, there was Madison. And because of the way she lived, there will always be a little bit of Madison in the work we do, the families we support, the children we comfort and the hope we continue to fight for.



EVERY CHILD HAS A STORY.

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