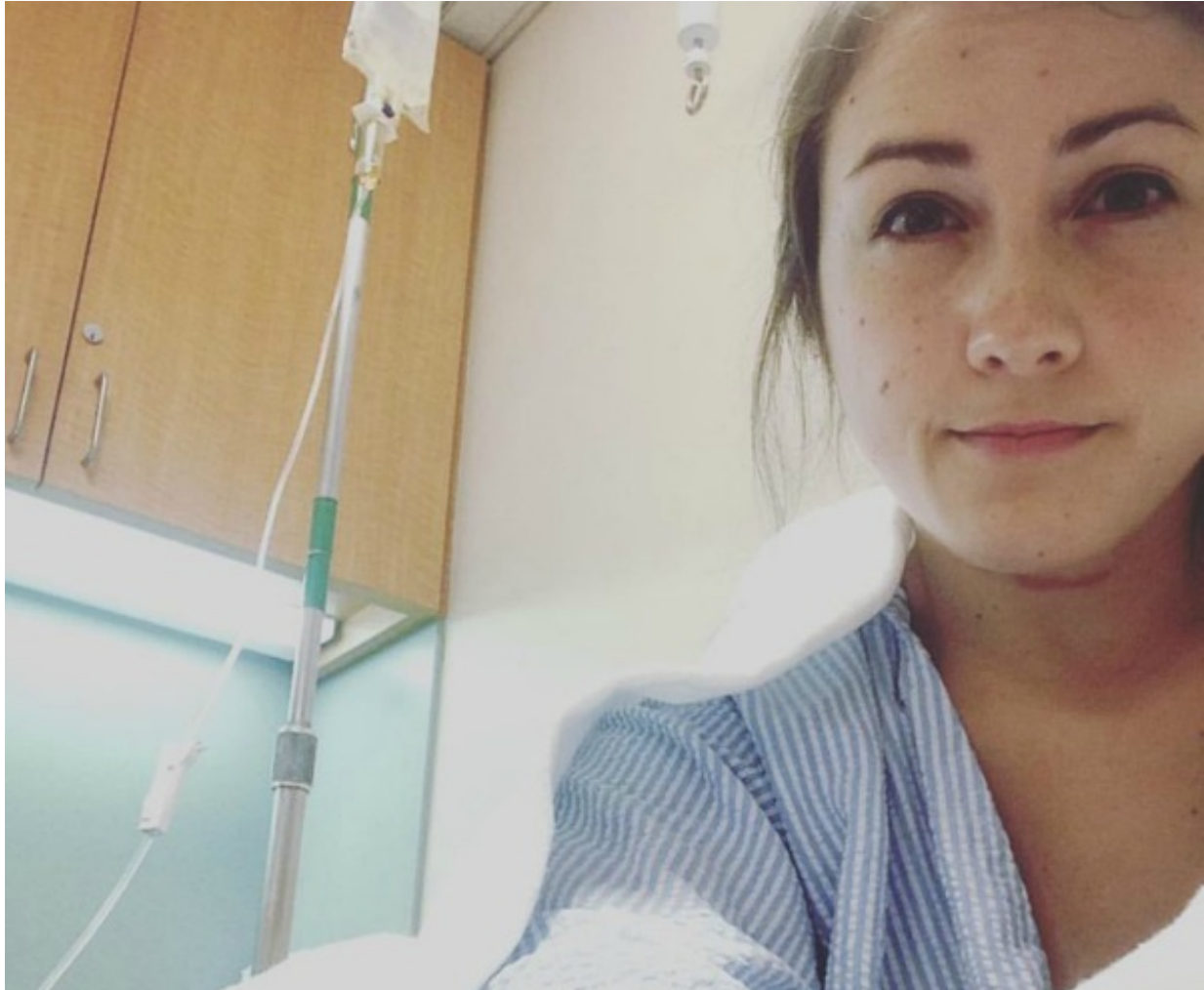


Sick And Uninsured: A 25-Year-Old Cancer Patient's Story

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At 15-years-old, Brianna Mercado was diagnosed with Ewing's Sarcoma, a rare form of bone cancer. Luckily, Brianna's doctors caught the cancer early and removed it with surgery. For a year after, she endured radiation and chemo, but she was warned that she would need follow-up visits for at least 10 years to make sure the cancer didn't come back. Not only did this begin a battle with her health, but a battle with the health care system too. Originally, Brianna was fortunate enough to benefit from her father's health care plan since he was a part of the union, but around 2010, her dad lost his job.

"I would look at the bills and one ambulance ride was something crazy like \$500. At one point during my treatment, I had to take an ambulance 5 times in one week, just because they needed to transport me to a different hospital," Brianna recalls.

Even the medication and shots that Brianna had to give herself were upwards of \$1,000,

“but the mark down was always incredible,” she says.

When Brianna’s dad got a job within the union again, she tried reapplying for insurance as his dependent, but she was denied due to “pre-existing conditions.” Because Brianna wasn’t insured, she missed two years of follow-up scans. It was with the passing of Obamacare that she was able to get health care again. Ironically, the day she went for her follow-up scans, they found a lump in her neck.

“I felt like my life was a soap opera,” says Brianna.

Though the doctors were telling her not to worry (because thyroid lumps are common in women), she knew she wanted to get it checked out immediately. Brianna says she went into “freak out mode” when the doctors did a biopsy and told her it could be cancerous. Though Brianna was living in New York, she was scheduled to have the surgery at home in California, along with 6 months of radioactive iodine treatments. Right before that, she gave a [TedX Talk](#), titled “Not Another Cancer Story,” to talk about her experience being diagnosed a second time. It wasn’t until they removed her entire thyroid that they declared it cancer.

Brianna’s plan was to move back to New York to pursue dance, and find a hospital on the east coast that accepted her dad’s health insurance, Kaiser Permanente. Unfortunately, the closest hospital to Brianna was in Washington D.C. If it wasn’t for the fact that she had a sister living in D.C, she doesn’t know how she would’ve gotten her follow-up care.

“When I visited the doctor in D.C., I could tell that he was in shock about my case. At that time, it was considered Stage 3 or 4 Thyroid Cancer because it had spread to my rib cage. He wanted to give me more radiation and I didn’t want to hear that. I just wanted to live my life,” remembers Brianna.

She went on to explain that the crazy part about her experience with cancer is that she never experienced any pain.

“The only pain and misery and unbearableness I’ve felt was because of the treatments that were making me sick,” she adds.

Naturally, Brianna wanted a second opinion. After doing research, she found Memorial Sloan Kettering in New York City (one of the top research centers for cancer in America). They were against radiation, but instead advocated for increasing and decreasing dosages of certain medication. In the past 2 years, this has lowered Brianna’s cancer cells (also medically known as thyroglobulin) by a significant amount. They were at 13.4 ng/mL when she first saw her doctor at Sloan Kettering and within 6 months, they went down to 2.8 ng/mL.

Brianna explained that she had to switch from her dad’s health insurance to her mom’s, Cigna, in order to get the care from Dr. Fish at Memorial Sloan Kettering.

"It's still expensive, but it's worth it because it's my health. I have to keep reminding myself of that," Brianna affirms.

She explains that thyroid cancer is "a weird cancer". "It's not something that necessarily takes your life, it just causes you a lot of discomfort." She's been dealing with the side effects of thyroid cancer all her life from being tired to being cold to having trouble regulating her metabolism.

Brianna believes that she's living a healthy lifestyle. She prioritizes her sleep much more than she used to. She drinks a lot of water, loves apple cider vinegar, and does her best to avoid processed foods.

"My goal is to live to be a grandmother one day," she says.



At the time of our interview, the fate of the Affordable Care Act remained to be seen. The tricky part is that Brianna turns 26 next month, which means she's aging out of her parent's health care plan. She's also a freelance dancer, which limits her options for attaining health care. The new plan proposal worried Brianna because it brought up more questions than

anything else about what would be offered to her. She was worried a lot of the precautionary measures she has to take like go for blood tests and scans wouldn't be possible because of the cost. She thought about turning to Medicaid, but knew that they wanted to limit its funding. (She choreographed a piece inspired by the current political climate in our country.)

Regardless, Brianna is relieved that the push to repeal and replace Obamacare failed. She recently reapplied and has to choose her best plan by April 15th, so she can be eligible for the benefits by May 1st.

"People deserve to be healthy. I believe that if you have your health, you have everything. It's the way of giving society equal opportunity."

When I asked Brianna how dance factored into her health decisions, she explained that being a professional dancer wasn't always the plan. While it's not a stable career, Brianna explains that she's dedicated to her craft and that maybe if it wasn't for cancer, she wouldn't be doing what she loves.

"I think I do have cancer to thank for letting me take the risk because I know I only have one life and I already almost lost it. When I got cancer again, I knew I was going to keep dancing. This is my life and I have an able body, I might as well use it while I have it."

Unfortunately, Brianna recently got her test results back and the cancer cells have increased to 3.3 ng/mL. The slight increase does concern her doctor, so she's scheduled to get a PET scan. Depending on the results, it might mean more surgery or back to radiation. It also might mean nothing, and she'll just have to be patient for the next 6 months.

As someone who tries to believe that everything happens for a reason, I asked Brianna how she manages to stay so positive after constantly hearing disappointing news. She says that while she has cried and been upset, she's always able to make light of the situation.

"I think it's just ingrained in me. I've learned I can't be mad at myself for this. There was no reason for either of the cancers to develop, so I can only think that my soul before me needed to learn a lesson about health and I'm the chosen one to overcome it. I almost take my adversities with pride, because if I don't do it, who will?"

Brianna says that each year on her birthday, she asks herself if she's ready to work ten times harder in order to achieve the things she wants to accomplish. And every year she says yes, because she knows it's worth it.

"I don't let my health bring me down as someone that's not adequate for things. It's my fighting spirit."



Images courtesy of Brianna Mercado

Image 1 by Kyle Breen Photography/Image 2 by Jayna Photography