

MEET NATALEE: A POWERFUL MARTIAL ARTIST WHO SHINES THROUGH POWER BREATHING

If you ask 10-year-old Natalee Laughton what scares her, she will immediately laugh and answer "Spiders!" Natalee's laughter is infectious and frequent, accompanied by a warm smile that would belie her everyday reality: Natalee has been fighting cancer for over a year.

Natalee was 9 years old when she was admitted to the ER with swollen lymph nodes all over her body. The doctor on call quickly contacted the Pediatric Hematology-Oncology department at Beaumont Hospital in Royal Oak, Michigan. Within a day, Natalee had a diagnosis: T-Cell Acute Lymphoblastic Leukemia, or ALL.

Natalee's dad, Robert, says the early days in the hospital were rough. Natalee was scared. She didn't really understand cancer, and was afraid to take medicines, especially pills, which she had difficulty swallowing. Crushing them up in slushees ended up doing the trick.

Slushees were just one tool Natalee used to make her cancer treatment manageable. The Heroes Circle played a pivotal role in supporting Natalee and providing her with coping tools. Thanks to a dedicated social worker, Natalee was able to get involved right away with the Heroes Circle, which teaches pain and stress management to sick children. She was only a couple weeks out of her initial hospital stay when she started attending classes, then virtual due to Covid. During these classes, Natalee learned fun non-contact karate moves like punches and kicks that helped her imagine breaking through her cancer. The therapeutic strategies like body scans and Power Breathing helped her learn how to relax her body and take control. Breathing meditations have been paramount to helping with cancer treatments. Natalee finds that even though accessing her port isn't painful, psychologically it's stressful. "Sometimes I'm scared it might hurt," she says. She has learned that utilizing Power Breathing helps her stay calm.



Natalee also uses Power Breathing outside of her cancer treatments. "I use it sometimes at home when I get angry," she says. Natalee believes it helps with things like sadness or fear, helping her to pivot to a happy feeling, breathing in light, which she describes as "anything that makes you happy." Robert agrees that Natalee "definitely loves her Power Breathing." He notes that she'll use it whenever some aspect of treatment becomes different, such as having a new nurse join her treatment team. "It definitely helps her feel good."

Between Covid and cancer treatments, Natalee attends school in a unique virtual manner: via robot. This robot is essentially a combination of an iPad mounted on a rolling device, which she controls from home or from the hospital using a Chromebook. "It just became a normal thing," Natalee says.

Meanwhile, the Heroes Circle has become an extra-curricular activity for Natalee. The classes provide a safe, fun outlet for Natalee, who giggles as she tells stories about joking with her Sensei's Michael and Peter. In fact, Natalee's last name—Laughton—seems spot-on for a girl fighting cancer with smiles and laughter. Robert notes that in many ways, Natalee has been a shy girl. He's witnessed his daughter come out of her shell through the Heroes Circle. "Classes bring a smile to her face, which is nice...I think it's helped bring out Natalee and her confidence." This confidence has brought out not just Natalee's humor, but an ability to tackle chemotherapy treatments head on. "She just rolls with it," says Robert.

Natalee loves her Power Breathing, but says that if someone had told her that breathing in light and happy thoughts would be helpful, "I'd have just thought they were crazy!" Still, she acknowledges that at one point, she was not thinking good thoughts, but thoughts that made her feel scared. Natalee's advice today to other kids going through similar trials? "Think of something happy."



Our powerful little martial artists have enormous impact and have found purpose by teaching the world. To learn more, visit HeroesCircle.org!