

Funding for Yale Cancer Answers is provided by Smilow Cancer Hospital. Welcome to Yale Cancer Answers, with the director of the Yale Cancer Center, Dr. Eric Winer. Yale Cancer Answers features conversations with oncologists and specialists who are on the forefront of the battle to fight cancer. Here's Dr. Winer.

00;00;28;06 - 00;01;03;07 Dr. Winer June 1st National Cancer Survivor Day, and it's also National Cancer Survivor Month. In the U.S., there are approximately 500,000 childhood cancer survivors. There are, of course, many, many more cancer survivors, most of whom are adults. Those childhood cancer survivors are both children still in some cases, and are also in our adult communities today. This evening, we have Cameron Wilson joining us, who goes by Cam and his mom, Jessica, and his dad, Brendan. Welcome to the show and thanks so much for being here.

00;01;03;22 - 00;01;31;06 Wilsons Thank you for having us.

Dr. Winer Cam was diagnosed with the blood cancer leukemia when he was just two years old. And it's now seven years later. He's nine. He's been off cancer treatment for several years. He received treatment for three and a half years. That that is until he was five.

00;01;32;09 - 00;02;01;23 And at this point, he's outrunning every other kid in gym class and apparently loves to dance, which maybe he'll tell us a little bit about. Let's start with before Kim was diagnosed. And I'm just going to start by asking Jessica and Brendon, what what made you think that there was something wrong with with Cameron? He was with me most of the day.

00;02;01;23 - 00;02;23;08 Brendan Wilson (Cameron's father) I was a stay at home dad at the time, going back to school there in my degree. And we were looking for things to do during the afternoons and we went to a library program where he would sing and dance with other kids and he walked into the library in October of 2017. A normal kid. There was nothing physically wrong that we saw.

00;02;23;09 - 00;02;44;20 Mentally, he was fine. We started the program and about halfway through the program he was singing and dancing and he sat down in front of me and he crawled over to me and sat in my lap and then didn't want to walk anymore. And so that was the first weird thing that was going on that we we thought maybe there's something we we really weren't sure.

00;02;45;07 - 00;03;24;17 Maybe sat down too fast, Maybe he bruised a bone or something. And so we we began the journey of going to his pediatrician, getting some X-rays, giving it a couple of days, and nothing seemed to change. We ended up going back a few days later with the advice to get some blood work, which we did. And later that night around midnight, when Jessica got a call from the on call pediatrician, when the bloodwork had come back and they pretty much said, get him to NPR as soon as possible.

00;03;24;20 - 00;04;00;17 The blood work was of alarming. It was very abnormal

and they didn't want to even wait till the morning. They just said, Get him there middle of the night. So we packed up and went to Yale, and that's where everything began. It must have been terrifying to say the least. And of course, there's no way you could have known what was wrong with him, because even though acute lymphocytic lymphoblastic leukemia is the most common type of leukemia in children, it's still pretty rare.

00;04;00;17 - 00;04;29;29 Dr. Winer And there are fewer than 5,000 children each year who develop this (ALL) in the United States. It's a relatively uncommon problem. Leukemia, of course, is much more common overall, and over 60,000 people have leukemia in the United States each year. But most of those people are adults and actually much older adults. So you you go to the hospital in and what did they tell you?

00;04;30;12 - 00;04;54;03 Jessica Wilson (Cameron's mother) It was confusing. We didn't have any symptoms. Obviously, Cameron didn't have any symptoms prior. So we were kind of you know, he was just two years old. We had a two year physical, probably, you know, a month and a half prior. Everything was fine. So it was hard to imagine what was going on. All I remember thinking was, you know, a kid doesn't usually just stop walking, right?

00;04;54;03 - 00;05;18;11 So we were kind of we were scared. We didn't know what was really happening, but we got to the E.R.. I think that's what scared me the most, was nobody could really tell us what was going on. And I think part of his diagnosis story is we were very proactive with Cameron that, you know, he stopped walking. I remember Brandon texted me, I was at work.

00;05;18;11 - 00;05;47;02 I had a pediatrician appointment for him that day. The pediatrician wasn't really concerned. We ended up getting bloodwork. They suggested it as like an outlandish precautionary idea, and we really pushed for it because it didn't make sense that our two year old could walk and then not walk. So I think I once we got to the hospital, we just really wanted answers at that point because because we were so proactive.

00;05;47;02 - 00;06;15;05 It wasn't like a common case of leukemia where most of the time, by the time you get bloodwork done, it's in your bloodstream. We were so proactive with Cameron that the cancer cells technically weren't even in his blood yet. They were still in his bone marrow. We caught it early, which is good, but it also was really frustrating and scary for the first, you know, three or four days because his blood work was abnormal, but it wasn't cancerous yet.

00;06;15;13 - 00;06;46;18 So we actually went into a bone marrow biopsy to diagnose him where usually that's a confirming practice. So we had gotten him there very early, which we're thankful for. But I think it was difficult to go through those few days. I mean, it was difficult anyway, but it was also difficult to not have a diagnosis and not have an answer for so many days because we were just left to imagine all the worst case scenarios and just different things happening around us that we didn't have any control over.

00;06;46;19 - 00;07;20;13 Dr. Winer Sure. And I'm guessing that his blood work, which which made them tell you to go to the hospital right away, showed that his probably that his platelet count was low and that he was anemic and his white count may have been low, but there weren't yet the cancerous cells streaming through his blood. And when you had the bone marrow, that's when it showed all the abnormal cells, which are often called black, that are very immature white blood cells.

00;07;21;18 - 00;07;49;23 Cam, when you hear this, Cam, what is it like to hear your parents talk about this? It's really cool because I don't remember any of the stuff, so it's kind of cool to hear them describe it so I can kind of picture what happened. And as as a kid who may, you know, eventually have children, can you imagine how scared they were?

00;07;51;01 - 00;08;24;21 Cam Wilson "They would probably they were like insanely scared. They like what's going to happen. It could be anything. What is this all that? Yeah. Now it's it's it's it's pretty hard. And I'm curious, what did the doctors say in terms of how hopeful you should be? They'll say they just said like it's going to be okay. Don't worry and stuff."

00;08;24;26 - 00;08;49;10 Dr. Winer "You think that's what they told your parents and and either Brandon or Jessica? Is that pretty much what they said? Yes. So I'll let Brendan talk a little bit about this, too. But I remember them saying that, you know, he got there early, which was a really good thing. The sooner you start treatment, I'm told, for almost any sickness, cancer, especially, I think the better."

00;08;50;04 - 00;09;09;25 Cam "But yes, they were they were hopeful. We were told that at some point we were just we should have been grateful to get a diagnosis because it was taking them so long to come up with one. So I think that was difficult. Once we had one, they were able to give us a little bit better idea of what to expect next."

00;09;10;07 - 00;09;36;00 Unknown Yeah, they at one point I remember them saying, hope that it's leukemia or hope that is cancer, which is such a weird thing to hear. But the reasoning behind that was because if it wasn't and his blood was so abnormal, they really didn't know what it was. And they could it be it could be a very obscure virus or something they didn't know about at all and the treatment would not have existed or there was something that they would have to take a lot longer to diagnose.

00;09;36;00 - 00;09;59;12 Unknown So, you know, once we were given the diagnosis as devastating as it was, we at least for me, I felt better. And I knew that there was a plan going forward. And we were given a long list of things that were going to happen. You know, we were inpatient for two weeks while he got his port in and started his chemo, and we started to understand what things were going to be like going forward.

00;09;59;12 - 00;10;20;11 Unknown And that was a relief for me to at least know

what what we're going to do next, which is, you know, a big burden off of our backs because we'd say we went five, six days knowing nothing. And it was getting extremely frustrating to go through all that scary. It was scary for them to have no idea he was getting transfusions and platelet transfusions.

00;10;20;11 - 00;10;43;08 Blood transfusions pretty much back to back is when we went in. His platelet count was about 9000. And I think minimally it's supposed to be 150,000. So he was constantly getting infusions and we didn't know why. So to hear them say, okay, now we kind of want to hope that it's cancer or at least something that we can treat is really scary as a parent to hear.

00;10;43;24 - 00;11;15;17 Well, the good news about platelets is that we all have more than we need, but when they count goes below 20,000 and then particularly when it goes below 10,000, it does increase the risk of bleeding. And so that's why everybody was so determined to make sure that that Cameron got transfusions to bring up the platelet count. Now, the good news, of course, and it's hard to say that having cancer is good news.

00;11;15;17 - 00;11;45;02 Dr. Winer And when you have a two year old who's totally healthy and then isn't healthy, it must be devastating to hear words like cancer, but allow the kind of cancer that he had, which is the most common cancer in children, is also the most curable, or certainly one of the most curable with, you know, somewhere in the range of 85 to 90% of of children being cured.

00;11;45;24 - 00;12;24;00 And the other good news is that there tend to be fewer long term effects with treatment for as well than for almost any other childhood cancer. So so again, the good news is you were facing a difficult few years, but a few years after which you could hope things would really return to sort of a new normal. What was it like hearing that Kim would have to go through treatment for what must have seemed like an endless period of time?

00;12;24;00 - 00;12;46;23 Jessica I mean, this wasn't like having an operation and being done. This was going on and on. I think it was hard for people to understand a lot of people didn't understand his diagnosis and didn't understand why it had to be the length of time that it was. And, you know, three and a half years is a long time to be pretty much in isolation.

00;12;46;23 - 00;13;17;03 And it was hard to explain to people why he was still on treatment, why we weren't able to do the things that most families get to do, especially once COVID happened. But a lot of people didn't understand the length of time and why it needed to be so long. And what was the reaction of your family and friends generally good for understanding why we had to not see them.

00;13;17;03 - 00;13;37;28 And it was tough. We we couldn't spend holidays or, you know, our Thanksgiving were people bringing food to us. Christmas was small groups or even outside while we saw my mom or Jessica's parents. And, you know, I'm not able to see his grandparents and his cousins for the holidays

was not easy for a couple of years. They understood.

00;13;37;28 - 00;14;12;19 But I think, you know, they we sometimes got a little bit of pushback like, hey, it's okay. You know, why don't we go inside and hang out for a little bit and in the middle of January or December, when the flu was going around, even pre-COVID, it was still risky. So we made a decision to make a very concerted effort to be as safe as possible, to minimize his risk and to minimize us having to be admitted to the hospital, even for a small cold, which could happen when he was, you know, during the rougher parts of his treatment.

00;14;12;19 - 00;14;30;07 And I don't think people understand what a little cold meant for us. It was traumatizing. We always had to go to the E.R. He always had to get poor access and blood drawn. And so I think people had a hard time sometimes understanding, well, you know, his immune system has to be built up. And that's not what this was.

00;14;30;07 - 00;14;59;13 Dr. Winer You know, he couldn't get sick or we would be in the hospital with very serious complications. Sure. Well, we're going to take just a very short break now. But coming up, we'll continue our conversation with Jessica and and Brendon and of course, with Cam as well. And, Cam, I'm going to be turning to you more to tell us a little bit about what life is like for a nine year old boy in 2025.

00;15;00;14 - 00;15;30;19 So we'll be right back.

Funding for Yale Cancer Answers comes from Smilow Cancer Hospital, where their survivorship clinic serves as a resource to support cancer survivors providing patients and families with information on cancer prevention, wellness research and survivorship. Smilow Cancer Hospital dot org. Over 230,000 Americans will be diagnosed with lung cancer this year, and in Connecticut alone, there will be over 2700 new cases.

00;15;30;21 - 00;15;54;19 More than 85% of lung cancer diagnoses are related to smoking, and quitting, even after decades of use can significantly reduce your risk of developing lung cancer. Each day, patients with lung cancer are surviving, thanks to increased access to advanced therapies and specialized care, new treatment options and surgical techniques are giving lung cancer survivors more hope than they have ever had before.

00;15;55;07 - 00;16;19;13 Clinical trials are currently underway at federally designated comprehensive cancer centers, such as the Battle to trial at Yale Cancer Center and Smilow Cancer Hospital to learn if a drug or combination of drugs based on personal biomarkers can help to control non-small cell lung cancer. More information is available at Yale Cancer Center dot org. You're listening to Connecticut Public Radio.

00;16;20;22 - 00;16;58;26 Dr. Winer Good evening again. This is Eric Winer with Yale Cancer Answers. I'm joined this evening by a family of three, Jessica and Brendon, who are the parents and their son Cameron, otherwise known as

Cam, who is a very active nine year old who is a leukemia survivor. And just a few facts and figures before we start. The truth is we've done a great job with childhood cancer in general.

00;16;59;01 - 00;17;50;17 That's a result of very carefully done clinical trials and research that's been done in laboratories across the world. And in 2025, approximately 85% of children diagnosed with cancer are alive at least five years after diagnosis. And for children who have ALL, which is what Cameron had, the the statistics are even better. Leukemia occurs in somewhere between 30 504,000 children each year in the U.S. and the peak age is between two and and six, although it can happen in children of any age from infancy all the way through the late teens.

00;17;51;11 - 00;18;21;22 So I want to just get back to our conversation and ask the parents here. One one more question, which is about talking to people about their son's leukemia and what one often hears from adults with cancer is that they figure out who's going to be helpful and who isn't going to be helpful among their friends and family. And I'm guessing you had a pretty similar experience.

00;18;22;06 - 00;18;47;22 And whether it's because your experience was so threatening and scary to someone that they couldn't help you or for other reasons, I'm sure there were a few people who you just felt like weren't quite there for you. Yeah. I will let Brendan answer too. I'm sure he has his opinions, but I definitely had some people that stepped up for us that I didn't.

00;18;48;04 - 00;19;05;29 Brendan Not that I didn't expect, but I was surprised at the amount that they stepped up. And then I also had people that I really thought would be there more that just did not know how to be there more for us. And both ways are fine and we had a lot of support, but there were definitely people that stepped up more than others.

00;19;05;29 - 00;19;26;13 And I will also say there were a few times that we were around people, even after going over all the precautions that just clearly did not respect the boundaries that we had or didn't understand how serious sickness was. And we did have to limit contact with them for some of the treatment time because it just was not worth it to risk Cameron's health.

00;19;27;06 - 00;19;56;09 Sure. Yeah. And I understand the part of it with not knowing how to react. I this is our or my first experience with the cancer in an immediate family member. And I don't know how I would react if somebody I know if a nephew or somebody had the same situation and I had no experience, I don't know if I would be comfortable trying to, you know, be around that all the time or make a lot of contact or if I would kind of shy away thinking, you know, I would be doing maybe more harm than good.

00;19;57;01 - 00;20;16;28 And I also think during the first part of Cam's treatment and he was on steroids, he gained a lot of weight and his hair fell out. He looked very different. He was, by anybody's account, not a healthy kid. But

as treatment moved on when the different types of chemo started, that didn't affect those areas. But we're still doing their job.

00;20;16;28 - 00;20;34;14 He looked a little a lot more like a normal three, four or five year old. And so when we even when we went out and we were doing things as a family, a lot of people didn't kind of understand, you know, that he was a sick child because he didn't need to lot so he wasn't in a wheelchair.

00;20;34;15 - 00;20;59;24 Dr. Winer You know, it was physically, you look fine. And to what extent did this affect your Jessica, your your job, your career? And Brendan, I think you said you were in in going to school at the time. Did you have to take time off from from work and from school? And you know, how much of a life disruptor was this?

00;21;01;02 - 00;21;21;10 Jessica So for me, work wise, my my, I worked for the state and they are fantastic. I have a great relationship with my bosses. I did take FMLA so I didn't have to miss any of his treatments. But I will say it would have been a lot harder for me to continue working if Cameron wasn't home with his dad.

00;21;21;19 - 00;21;40;18 That made it really easy for me to maintain my job because there it was horrible. I mean, mental health. My mental health was obviously terrible during that time, and I was lucky enough and fortunate enough to have a job where I felt supported and I knew Cameron was safe and taken care of. And I was at every clinic appointment.

00;21;40;18 - 00;22;04;04 So I was very grateful if I had chosen to stay home with Cam shortly before diagnosis to get my degree, I went online and started that process. And so it kind of worked out that we were we were told when he was diagnosed, one parent's going to have to stay home. It's almost impossible to bring into treatment and clinic weekly and administer everything he needs and take care of him.

00;22;04;04 - 00;22;23;27 With two full time parents working, which is what we had previous. So I was already home. I just continued that. I delayed school for a little bit and stretch it out. It took me a longer to graduate than I wanted to, but, you know, I would I would do my classes when he was napping or when Jess got home from work, I would I would, you know, run downstairs and do it, you know, take a test to write a paper.

00;22;23;27 - 00;22;44;17 So we made it work. We just had to work around it. And, you know, everything worked out in the end, but it was just a delayed experience for everybody. And now nothing we can do about it. We just kind of decided this is how things are going to be until he's done. You know, in in cancer can also take a pretty significant financial toll on a family.

00;22;45;00 - 00;23;11;26 Dr. Winer Was your insurance good? Did you have did you have challenges there? Yeah we Brennan was home a lot longer than we anticipated for sure. Cameron could not go to school, couldn't go to daycare, couldn't go to pre-K, couldn't do any of that stuff. So we had a lot of family

support. My dad specifically is part of a volunteer fire association, and they threw Cameron a beautiful banquet in the beginning of his diagnosis.

00;23;11;26 - 00;23;41;05 There were community vendors that gave raffle prizes and that really helped I think, because my insurance was good, but it never covers anything. Parking unexpected paid time off. Just we had to do DoorDash. I mean, there was an unexpected financial burdens that I don't think people realize it, aside from just the treatment cost. Yeah, people forget about parking and gas and the added cost of food when it's delivered.

00;23;41;08 - 00;24;04;03 We couldn't go to a grocery store, you know, we couldn't do anything normal. And of course, you were dealing with this at least partially during COVID, which made everything I'm sure, every so much more stressful. So, Cam, tell us about your life now. You know, you're you're going into fifth grade, I think. Yes. And what do you like in school?

00;24;04;27 - 00;24;35;21 Um, I really like writing, reading and certain types of math. Got it. And I was told in advance that you like to dance as well. Yes. A lot. And did you dance in some group or do you have lessons? Um, I sometimes I started taking lessons last fall, and I'm doing it again as a summer program this summer.

00;24;36;00 - 00;25;05;08 And I think you have at least one brother or sister. Is that the case? Yes, I have one brother. He has about a little over two and a half. And what's his name? Evan. Evan. And does Evan get into your stuff and bother you sometimes, or is it just all great now? He like, once a day gets into my stuff?

00;25;05;08 - 00;25;40;18 Definitely. And are you patient with him? It depends on the day. Sometimes, yes, sometimes not at all. I got it. So on a more serious note, I realize that you only have some recollections of your cancer treatment, but you've heard about it. And I suspect that in in some very important ways you're different and maybe even a little more thoughtful and experienced than the average nine year old.

00;25;40;18 - 00;26;06;13 Dr. Winer: So I'm going to ask you, if you were talking to another child with cancer at the moment, what would you tell them? I would say Qantas seems like it's impossible, but it's nice if you have the right mindset and if you never give up, you can do anything you want. Well, I think that's pretty good advice. What do you think you want to do when you grow up?

00;26;07;00 - 00;26;31;03 I'm not really sure. Yeah, I might want to do something for charity like they did to me, but I don't really have a full knowledge of what I want to do. And I imagine you still go in and see your doctors sometimes. Is that right? Yeah, I do it once every like four months now.

00;26;31;09 - 00;26;57;07 But I used to have to go like sometimes once a day, once a week, all that. And how do you feel about all those doctors? Do they scare you? They used to. But as I've gotten to see them more and more, they've

been really good to me. So not anymore. Well, it it's sort of incredible what you've been through.

00;26;57;23 - 00;27;27;04 Do you think you're different than other kids? Yeah, in a lot of different ways. Know to tell us about that. I think that since I had cancer of like I have a different mindset, meaning like the kids that didn't are always like focused on doing crazy stunts after slide and I'm over here just like walking around playing tag with my friends that are slower than me.

00;27;27;16 - 00;27;50;29 I can't believe I, when I was little, when I was like five or six or so, I would be the slowest kid in my class. But now I'm like one of the fastest in my class and had that happened, I just I play a lot with my brother because he loves to go outside. And over the years I've just been more and more physical and active.

00;27;50;29 - 00;28;12;07 So I think that really helped. Let me just ask one last question to you, Jessica and and Brendon, and we're going to have to keep this short. But how much has this changed you? A very lot. I can't think of any part of our life that wasn't affected by it. And it makes some things easier and some things harder to just let him be a kid.

00;28;12;07 - 00;28;34;29 But it changed everything about our family and our life. Yeah, it put a lot of strain on the family, on the marriage, as you could understand. But we got through it. And if we can get through that, will things that happened, we say, you know what, This isn't so bad compared to what we already went through. And I think we have a better spend that sense of perspective on on some of the things that happened to us in our daily lives.

00;28;35;19 - 00;28;58;29 This has been a survivorship story in honor of National Cancer Survivor Month. If you have questions, the address is cancer-answers@yale.edu and past editions of the program are available in audio and written form at Yale Cancer Center dot org. We hope you'll join us next time to learn more about the fight against cancer Funding for Yale Cancer Answers is provided by Smilow Cancer Hospital.