

# Celebrating a courageous life



Nicole Potts marks her 26<sup>th</sup> birthday in 2000. A malignant tumor was found in her brainstem when she was 9 years old.

## Peace comes to a young woman from Trophy Club who has been battling cancer since she was a child

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**TROPHY CLUB** - Nicole Potts woke up in a Dallas hospital in October, a few days after her 28th birthday, with half of her head shaved and plagued by intense headaches that brain surgery should have cured.

She had survived the risky operation only to learn that she would need another on the other side of her brain, where surgeons would try to extract more of an aggressive tumor wrapped around a nerve.

When she woke up after the second surgery, the headaches persisted, fluid built up in her lungs and doctors told her that she would soon need chemotherapy. So, while Nicole waited, she worked out a philosophy.

"I would feel really bad if people didn't get to see from my point of view," she said from her bed at Presbyterian Hospital in Dallas. "It's so sad to me that people have to go through struggles to appreciate what they have in life."

This comes from a girl whose first tumor, in her brainstem, appeared at age 9. It comes from a girl who started chemotherapy at age 11. It comes from a girl who has endured four surgeries in her spinal cord and two in her brain, and has experienced so much radiation therapy that her body will no longer tolerate the treatment.

If Nicole could get her fingers to hold a pen, she would write a book, something that introduces children to paralysis and cancer and helps deaden the fear.

She already has a title in mind: My Next Birthday.

## **Tumor found**

When Nicole was 9, a bright-eyed Girl Scout in California who took ballet and piano lessons, doctors found a malignant tumor in her brainstem. She wasn't expected to see age 16.

Two years later, the tumor worsened, and family members gathered in the living room. Nicole's mother, Dyanne Schultz, tried to explain what chemotherapy involves -- the hair loss, the weight gain, the vomiting.

Nicole looked back with sad eyes.

"This must be so hard on you," she told her mother.

She started junior high school chubby from steroids and nearly hairless. For her classmates, this was a time of puppy love and boys.

"Cancer girl," some called her. Nicole endured the taunts. "She knew they were just kids," said her brother, Michael, who is 24. "She knew they didn't know any better."



**Nicole Potts hugs stepfather Fred Schultz. Her family moved to Trophy Club last summer when Schultz got a job in Irving.**

Nicole's hair grew back curly and long, she lost the extra weight and, with her deep brown eyes, showed an engaging smile. She managed a 3.8 grade-point average in her Los Angeles high school, even though she took codeine every day and sometimes lost control of her bladder.

"I would come to the office to get her," her mother said. "We would go home to get new clothes, and she always wanted to go back to school."

Still, those were relatively normal years.

The cancer remained at bay while she started college at Emory University in Atlanta, where she studied psychology. There are pictures of Nicole as a college student: She is chumming around with her sorority sisters, dressed in a formal gown, posing with her medical-student boyfriend.

She earned an internship at a children's hospital in Atlanta, and she would tell her young patients, "This is how an IV works," using pictures and dolls. She could tell them how it felt to wake up with 100 stitches, or what it is like to have spinal cord fluid leaking through a scar, and how to keep from being afraid.

She and her boyfriend got engaged, and she beat death for a decade.

### **New philosophy**

That peaceful time, however, was brief.

The tumor grew back in Nicole's brainstem. She started losing her balance and her peripheral vision. There were more surgeries and endless rehabilitation.

Fluid built up in her spinal column, and before long Nicole was paralyzed from the chest down. At one point, she survived a 15-hour surgery on her spinal cord, in which doctors pulled out a foot-long tumor that had little tumors growing inside of it. When Nicole awoke from this surgery, she could move her arms again, though she had little feeling in them.

But her legs were useless forever. She and her fiance split after his parents told him that she was an invalid. Her family had drained their savings and their retirement funds. Michael lost his job at a Los Angeles film studio, having spent so many days with her in various hospitals, and had to move in with relatives.

The family moved to Trophy Club last summer when her stepfather, Fred Schultz, got a job in Irving. Even then, Nicole's godfather had to loan them the down payment for a house.



**This photo shows Nicole Potts when she attended Emory University in Atlanta. Her cancer was in remission.**

Still, Nicole had hopes of working again. In a wheelchair, she could be a living example. She could show children that there is no need to be angry, that bitterness couldn't cure them -- it could only chase away people who cared.

She could work that philosophy into something concrete, something that would outlive her.

"I know we can't all live in this perfect little world where everybody is nice to each other," she said. "But if you have a fight with your cousin, go ahead and call her."

Then last fall, doctors found a new tumor in her brain. It was the size of a quarter. Family members gathered in the living room again. Nicole finished writing her will and making arrangements to be buried. She called childhood friends from California, the ones who never taunted her when she was a little girl with no hair. One of them had recently lost her parents to cancer, and Nicole could explain, "Look at it this way. They're together."

And she told her family that she felt complete peace. She knew that she was on Earth for a reason, maybe just to show people that it could always be worse. Then she said good night, and braced herself for another surgery.

### **Hospital visits**

Nicole raises her head and shakes your hand when you visit her room in the intensive care unit.

She wears an oxygen mask that covers her face, and she spends a lot of time asleep. Chemotherapy starts soon, and she doesn't know when she can go home to Trophy Club.

Her stepfather visits six days out of seven, and someone from the family comes every day. Nicole wonders what she would say if God stopped by and took a seat across from her bed. She wishes that she could think of something clever, but she can't think of any questions.

She isn't ready to go yet. She isn't finished. She needs to leave something behind.

"I almost feel selfish, but I want to be here until I am done," she says. "After that, I'm cool."

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