

When cancer changes everything

Hannah Flynn



Connor Stanford now 26 and 10 years in remission.

“You have cancer.”

It’s one sentence no one wants to hear.

But for 15-year-old Canberra teen, Connor, it was almost a relief. For his entire life he’s felt different, looked different, was different. After years of being chronically unwell with no answers, finally, he knew what was wrong.

Growing up, Connor’s family knew there was something wrong. At 5 he had a long face and walked on his toes, he grew very tall, had a high palate and a thick tongue.

They visited numerous specialists, but all tests were inconclusive. No one was too concerned because his symptoms were minor, so they let it go.

10 years later, Connor was on a school camp and caught an infection from the river and became very sick. Then he caught a virus from his little sister and was bed ridden for a week, losing 14kg.

A nutritionist at the hospital noticed a lump on the side of Connor’s neck. A biopsy showed it was cancer and within the month he was booked in for a thyroidectomy.

That afternoon Connor and his dad broke the news to his mum and two younger sisters.

Unexpectedly, the youngest one said “Oh cool!... Now I can go to Canteen, my friend goes to Canteen. This is awesome.”

His parents were horrified at her reaction, but Connor thought it was hilarious and was “glad” for the light relief.

[Canteen](#) provides support to young people and their families experiencing cancer. They help families in a variety of ways and provide free support services for 12 to 25-year-olds. Canteen offers both individual counselling and group programs like overnight camps or day events.

Connor was diagnosed with Stage 4 Medullary thyroid cancer, which is extremely rare. He was given six months to live.

After surgery and an array of tests doctors discovered that he had a very rare genetic condition called MEN2B. This condition explained everything, all the symptoms that had no answers.

“It was a huge weight off me, to finally know what had been wrong for the past 10 years,” Connor said. “Suddenly knowing what the cause of most of the shit had been weirdly made me very happy.”

Connor has been receiving chemotherapy for 9 years. He is now in remission but can’t stop treatment or his cancer recurs.

“I was 15 when I was diagnosed,” Connor said. “Having to be stuck at home by myself, missing out on a lot growing up was really hard.

“My friends didn’t know whether to try and talk about what was going on, or just pretend it wasn’t happening and carry on as normal.”



“Every year, another 23,000 young people have their world turned upside down by cancer.” - Canteen

Canteen became a safe place for Connor. It was a place where he could meet other young people who were experiencing the same things.

“Being in a place where everyone had that understanding... was just really nice,” he said.

Sarah* worked as a psychosocial worker in this field for more than four years and supported young people with a cancer diagnosis.

She said there is a grief and loss process that goes hand in hand with a cancer diagnosis. A person loses their health, their sense of future and treatments can potentially have a lasting effect on their physical well-being for the rest of their lives.

“Facing your mortality has a really significant impact on how you then relate to the rest of your life and the rest of your world,” Sarah said.

Sarah said support systems like Canteen provide an opportunity for people to talk about the things that no one else wants to talk about.

Kim* is the Programs Officer for Canteen in the ACT. She organises events for Canteen members to connect with others who have a cancer experience.

She said people often feel very isolated once they receive a cancer diagnosis and sometimes they want to meet other young people who are going through similar things.

There are a wide range of events that members can get involved in. Ski camps at Thredbo, burger nights in their Canberra office, and even national virtual book clubs are regularly on offer. Kim explained that everything she and other Canteen staff do is driven by the members.

“What we try to do is have such a diverse range of things so that there’s something for everyone,” Kim said.

For anyone going through a cancer experience and considering joining Canteen, Connor said he was very glad he had it going through those times. “Just do it. It was one of the best things I ever did.”

*last names withheld