



Kaleigh O'Brien
2014 Jingle Bell Run/Walk
Adult Honoree
Rock River Valley/Loves Park, IL

My name is Kaleigh O'Brien, I am 28 years old and I am a survivor. I am telling my story to spread awareness, and I am hopeful to find a cure for this awful disease. When I was a freshman in high school, I started having trouble waking up in the morning. Getting out of bed became a daily struggle for me. I noticed my hair started falling out and every joint in my body ached. I developed ongoing fevers and started noticing a "butterfly rash" across the arch of my nose. My family decided it was time to go see a doctor right before Christmas in 2001.

When we saw the oncologist, we mentioned that my hair had started falling out; it was as if a light bulb went off in his head. He knew instantly that I had Lupus. I was put on medicine and slowly but surely started getting back to my normal self. Going to school in Belvidere, I participated in almost every sport I could play. Although, the only thing at the time that sounded good to me was popping some Tylenol and lying on the couch trying not to move so much, so the pain would not escalate. At 16 years old going through this was unimaginable. I was always questioning, what is going to happen next?

My rheumatologist quickly started me on some medication, the main one being prednisone, to help ease the pain. This is a steroid that was called the "wonder drug" but is extremely horrible for the body. One of the side effects of the medicine was putting on 80 lbs., and developing a moon shaped face. Going through this in high school was awful. I can only thank my friends and family for standing by my side through this. I know I was not easy to work with, or deal with. Somehow I always thought positive. I told myself, I have been dealt this situation in life for a reason, and I know I can handle this. I have gone through so much that I do not believe any young person should go through. Since my diagnosis I have had multiple blood clots in my legs and I ended up having both of my hips replaced at the age of 24 due to the prednisone destroying my joints. In November of 2013 I was diagnosed with Lupus Nephritis, which means the Lupus has attacked my kidneys. I have been doing rounds of Chemotherapy for nine months with the goal of putting my Lupus in remission. I feel this can only get better, right? I thank my friends, family and coworkers for standing by my side and helping me fight this battle that I am hoping is almost over.

I have finally graduated from Rock Valley College with my Associate of Arts degree, and I am eventually going on to receive my Bachelors. This disease has not stopped me from achieving my goals. As of today, I have absolutely no joint pain, and my kidneys are functioning normally. Thank you for taking the time to read my story; I did this to help raise awareness for the disease. Please keep the Arthritis Foundation and those suffering from this disease in your thoughts and always stay optimistic to finding a cure.

We are grateful for Kaleigh's strength and determination, and we are thrilled to have her as the 2014 Jingle Bell Run/Walk honoree.

About the Arthritis Foundation

The Arthritis Foundation (www.arthritis.org) is committed to raising awareness and reducing the unacceptable impact of arthritis, which strikes one in every five adults and 300,000 children, and is the nation's leading cause of disability. To conquer this painful, debilitating disease, we support education, research, advocacy and other vital programs and services.