

# Roxana Relay For Life Honors Cancer Patients While Continuing Fundraising For ACS

by Colin Feeney, Contributing Sports Writer  
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**ROXANA** - The annual Relay for Life ceremonies, honoring cancer patients throughout the area, was held Friday evening in Roxana, starting with a parade of cars containing those fighting the disease and all of its forms, underneath a banner, continuing with speeches from those affected by cancer by the tennis courts and Charlie Raich Field at Roxana High School, and concluding with a circle of Luminara candles, with the names of cancer patients who were being honored.

The Relay is sponsored by the American Cancer Society, and is one of its main fundraising efforts throughout the year. The Relay committee had to make adjustments due to the COVID-19 pandemic, which included the wearing of masks for each participant, but the event was very much a success, as cancer survivors and patients were celebrated as each car went under the banner.

During the relay portion of the event, each survivor and patient had their names announced as they passed under the banner, much to the delight of family and friends who were there to provide support. The parade was escorted by the Roxana Fire Department, who provided trucks and ambulances for the parade.

After the parade, Brian and Jenna Garner of Godfrey shared their story of the battle of their four-year-old daughter, Lexi, who is currently battling against a form of leukemia. Their journey began in July, 2018, when Lexi was two-and-a-half. Lexi had suffered

from unexpected and unexplained fever, and an examination by her pediatrician showed normal vital signs, but still ordered blood work to see if there was anything wrong, and possibly call in an antibiotic medicine.

"Hours later, she frantically called me, and said all the numbers from Lexi's labs were extremely dangerously low," Jenna Garner said, "and she had no immune system. She had already called St. Louis Children's Hospital (emergency room) ahead, and they would be waiting on us with an isolated room and masks, because picking up a virus or an infection with an immune system that low could be deadly."

The Garner family raced the 45 minutes from Godfrey to the Central West End of St. Louis City, where the hospital is located, and were immediately admitted to the hematology and oncology floor, where doctors worked throughout the night into the next morning in order to stabilize Lexi in order to begin testing on her blood. By the next afternoon, Lexi had been stabilized enough to begin general testing under general anesthesia.

"They had decided they had wanted to do a bone marrow biopsy," Jenna said, "and take a sample of bone marrow from her hip, and they decided they wanted to do a lumbar puncture, or a spinal tap, and take a sample of cerebrospinal fluid."

The lead oncologist would come by that Wednesday evening and escorted the Garners to a conference room to say what no parent of a young child ever wants to hear: Lexi was suffering from a form of leukemia.

"Things progressed very quickly after that evening," Jenna said. "The very next day, they had scheduled her for surgery to install a port in her chest, and begin intensive chemotherapy immediately."

The frontline part of Lexi's chemotherapy lasted from that July until January, 2019, consisting of weekly chemotherapy, including IV treatment through her port, sedated spinal taps to inject chemo treatments into her spinal fluid, and a mix of oral chemo pills and steroids.

"Frontline treatment is the hardest, and harshest portion of treatment," Jenna said. "They are continuously blasting away at every last cell of her body, trying to find any cancer that might be hiding out somewhere. And the chemotherapy does not differentiate between good and bad cells, so it kills them all."

Because of the treatments, Lexi ended up having several inpatient stays in the hospital, due to fever and low blood count. One of the stays was in the pediatric Intensive care unit for a bacterial infection.

"Unfortunately, that means we didn't get to go out much, or go anywhere," Jenna said. "Now, she's in the portion of her treatment which is called long-term maintenance. Long-term maintenance began in February of 2019, and will continue and finish up this October of 2020."

During the long-term maintenance part, chemo and labs are now done every month, but Lexi still receives both IV treatments and spinal taps, still takes steroids, and daily oral chemo happens every day, with two treatments every Wednesday.

"It seems like a long time for treatment; if you count that up, it's two-and-a-half years," Jenna said. "But unfortunately, the difference between adult cancer and childhood cancer is often the rates of relapse. And unfortunately, in Lexi's case, leukemia has one of the highest rates of relapse of all the childhood cancers. So the best chance she has to prevent this relapse is to do the maintenance therapy for two years."

The first year will be the most critical, according to Jenna, as the chances for relapse is the highest, but the rate goes down for each year after that. After being off treatment for five years, Lexi will be declared clinically cancer-free.

"In the meantime, we will gratefully settle for ringing the no more treatment and end of treatment bell at the beginning of October of 2020," Jenna said.

Jenna then recited some statistics about her daughter's treatments, which included the spinal taps, blood draws, chemo treatments, heart echos, ultrasound exams, X-rays, surgeries and transfusions. Lexi lost her hair twice because of the treatments, spending 35 nights in the hospital, 100 days of steroid treatment, 458 days of oral chemo, and has fought against the cancer for a total of 745 days and counting.

"All this to say, is very nerve-wracking to hear that your child has cancer," Jenna said.

On the first night of their first hospital stay, Jenna did research on the American Cancer Society website, remembering her volunteering days at her job during previous Relays. It turned out to be a very valuable resource for her and her family.

"And I was shocked," Jenna said. "I was able to learn about the difference between adult and childhood cancer. I was able to learn more about Lexi's specific type of leukemia. I was able to learn about her treatment protocol, and the types of chemotherapy that was going to be used. There was even studies published, and all the specifics of all the survival rates. It was so amazing to have all of these resources at my fingertips in one location. And the best part was that all of the services for patients and families were free."

The Garners expressed gratitude to count Lexi among the cancer survivors being honored at this year's relay.

"She is in good company with you all," Jenna said. "Your perseverance and determination is nothing short of extraordinary. So thank you to everyone who chooses to help raise money for the American Cancer Society that directly helps families like us. We are honored to share our story with you this evening."

The Luminara ceremony continued with a cruise around the park, where the names of cancer patients and survivors were read while candles lit up their names, giving hope to one day that people will be able to live in a cancer-free world.

[Charles Thomas also contributed to this story.](#)