

Ballet San Jose dancer diagnosed with Hodgkin's Lymphoma

Ballet San Jose Silicon Valley principal dancer DALIA RAWSON, 32 years old, has been diagnosed with Hodgkin's Lymphoma and has taken a leave of absence to fight the disease. Dalia was born in Saratoga and joined the company in 1991. In addition to dancing with the company (in many principal and solo roles) Dalia also acts as a rehearsal assistant and teaches in our school.

I could send you a "normal" press release, but Dalia's letter below is so much more elegant than anything I could craft, that I would like to just present it to you. This is Dalia in her own words.



In early January, I was diagnosed with Hodgkin's Lymphoma, a very curable cancer of the lymphatic system. This was terrifying and shocking news to receive, as I had just finished a run of THE NUTCRACKER during which my partner Michael Doerner and I danced our best performances ever in alternating shows of both of the ballet's leading pair of roles, the Tsar and Tsarina from Act II and star roles of Prince Alexis and Maria. It seemed impossible that I could have completed such a grueling run of performances so well while suffering from what turned out to be Stage IV cancer.

There was some immediate good news; Hodgkin's Lymphoma is considered the most curable form of cancer, so my prognosis was good from the outset, even though my cancer was at an advanced stage. I am being treated at the Stanford Cancer Center, where the world's foremost Hodgkin's experts are overseeing my case. I am extremely lucky to be treated at such a wonderful facility, where all of the doctors, nurses and staff are friendly, professional and excellent at what they do. I am being treated with a regimen called Stanford V. This is an aggressive approach that has had very good results. The treatment includes twelve weeks of chemotherapy, a break for two weeks, then approximately five weeks of radiation therapy. My mother, who has never missed a performance of mine with the ballet, now drives to San Jose from Brentwood (near Livermore) to take me to each and every doctor's appointment in Palo Alto. Her dedication and strength throughout this experience inspires me to stay positive and to be as strong as she has proven herself to be. I am now almost halfway done with the chemotherapy part of my treatment, and the doctors are thrilled with my progress. They say that the presence of disease has already been dramatically reduced, and that they see no reason not to expect a complete cure by the end of June.

I had been planning on marrying Gareth Hughes, a software engineer at NVIDIA, on June 3. Unfortunately, that date falls right at end of my treatment when I probably will not be feeling my best. Therefore, we decided to postpone our big wedding reception and celebration, to be held at the San Jose Museum of Art, to a later date sometime this fall, when we should have a great deal to celebrate. We did not want to postpone getting married, however, so we did just that on February 16th at the Clerk-Recorder's Chapel in San Jose. We had wanted to get married on Valentine's Day, but I had to have chemotherapy on that day. So instead, Gareth, his parents, his brother, my parents and I all went to my chemo treatment together. It was a bit of a circus, as most chemo patients don't bring so many guests along with them. I had baked chocolate chip cookies to bribe the nurses with, and to share with my fellow chemo patients, so that was a fun day at the hospital for me.

Two days later, Gareth and I were married. I couldn't have asked for a more personal, heartfelt, or meaningful ceremony. Gareth's parents and brother were able to attend from Australia, as were my brother from New York, sister from Montana, and uncle from Ottawa. We had a much larger and more elaborate ceremony than I think they have ever seen in the Clerk-Recorder's Chapel.

My best friend from childhood, Manisha Shah, acted as my maid of honor, my sister was the ring bearer, my father gave me away, and we crammed about thirty people into a room with seating for sixteen. As a dancer I couldn't help but choreograph a processional set to music, an instrumental version of "And I Love Her" by The Beatles, played on my iPod by fellow dancer Zuri Goldman. The elaborate ceremony I had orchestrated, complete with a bouquet of green cymbidium orchids (a variety grown by Gareth's father who owns an orchid nursery in Australia), a veil, and crying by almost everyone in attendance, flustered the lovely woman who performed the ceremony so much that she lost her voice and forgot what she was supposed to say. This all added to the charm of the event, and I will never forget the love I felt in that room on that day, surrounded by the people who love me most, and promising my love and faithfulness to the man of my dreams. Even with my medical problems, that was without a doubt the happiest day of my life. After the ceremony, we had a small reception at the lovely home of dancers Catharine Grow and her husband Zuri Goldman, complete with wedding cake, champagne and many lengthy toasts.

I had luckily not begun to lose my hair yet at that time; this was during my third week of chemotherapy, so I was able to wear my hair as I had wanted to; long, down, and with a little veil. I have since made the decision to have my hair cut short, as that is supposed to make the inevitable—but temporary hair loss caused by chemotherapy—easier to deal with. Robin Church, Ballet San Jose's wig master, has been my hair angel. She has helped me pick out a wig and then restyled it so it looks more like my real hair. She is making me a new wig using some of my own hair, and has cut my hair into the cutest short haircut (I have never had short hair, but I like it!) for the time being. She has also offered to put extensions in as soon as my hair starts to grow back, which should happen two to three weeks after my chemotherapy is finished. Catharine Grow has also knitted me the most amazing little green hat to wear, so I should be able to get through the hairless phase with as little difficulty as is possible for a somewhat vain ballerina.

I am currently on a leave of absence from Ballet San Jose, and I miss being around my friends there every day. I have every intention to return to work for the company in the future. The support and love given to me by the dancers, staff, school, and Dennis himself, have helped me to get through this difficult time feeling more loved than I ever have before. I am staying busy by working at home towards a college degree through a distance-learning program offered by Skidmore College called University Without Walls.

Although this has been an extremely difficult time for me and for my family, it has also brought us closer together, and, clichéd as it may sound, helped us rediscover the truly important things in life. The visits of my new in-laws and relatives, and the outpouring of prayers and support

from friends near and far, have opened my eyes to the power of love. I look forward to my future life with Gareth, expecting to be renewed, refreshed, and in a sense reborn, after this traumatic and life-changing experience.

DALIA RAWSON

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