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Friends share a fight: Teenagers help each other cope with cancer

By Victor R. Martinez \ El Paso Times
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EL PASO -- They are both 14 years old, eighth-graders at Slider Middle School, two fragile warriors in the fight of their lives.

One is Angel Carrillo. Sitting on his bed at The Children's Hospital at Providence, he feels comfort in his surroundings.

His blanket says Pittsburgh Steelers, his favorite football team. Cards and letters from classmates and friends are tacked on the walls. It certainly is not home, but he is making the most of it.

Doctors diagnosed Angel with lymphoma on March 12 and he has been at Providence since. Lymphoma is treatable with chemotherapy and in some cases radiotherapy and/or bone marrow transplantation.

His family is still coming to terms with the idea that such an active boy could get sick so quickly.

"I could not believe what was happening," said his mother, Vicky Carrillo. "He had just finished track practice and then he got a fever and his feet got humongous. They were so swollen we had to cut his socks off."

On this day, Angel is visited by his good friend Alexis Gonzalez. Alexis knows exactly what Angel is going through.

Physicians diagnosed him with a form of cancer in June 2009 and sent him to MD Anderson Cancer Center in Houston.

"They found a tumor in his pelvis and first thought it was Ewing's sarcoma," said his mother,



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Teresa Gonzalez. "Then they thought it was synovial sarcoma. They wanted to amputate his right leg because the tumor was putting too much pressure on the leg and doctors felt there was not a better remedy."

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Doctors told him amputation would increase his chances of survival by 20 percent, but Alexis said his leg was his life and he didn't want it taken from him.

"I told them if I was going to die, I would rather take my leg with me," he said.

The family got a second opinion, and Alexis went to Boston to receive proton therapy at Massachusetts General Hospital.

"The doctors in Boston said it was an undifferentiated cell and began treatment," Gonzalez said. "He got better and better every day. The doctors are very happy with the results. It's like he never had anything wrong with him."

An undifferentiated cell is one that has not yet assumed the functional characteristics it will later acquire.

Alexis returned home and is recovering nicely. He last underwent chemotherapy at Providence on April 21 and appears to be cancer free.

"I come over just to cheer him up," Alexis said of his visits with Angel.

"It's nice to have somebody else here who knows what I'm going through," Angel said.

Angel is being schooled in the hospital. Alexis, after being home-schooled all year, returned to Slider on Monday.

Alexis is a member of his school's track, cross-country, soccer, football and basketball teams. He also plays alto saxophone in the honor and jazz bands and is a member of the National Junior Honor Society.

"I was shocked when I found out about Angel," said Alexis, who was in Boston at the time. "It was strange because we were both from the same school. It got me thinking if there was something wrong with our school. Something in the water or something. I never thought it would happen to someone else."

Alexis and Angel talk about basketball, football and regrowing their hair after chemotherapy.

"Mine is coming out straight," Alexis said with a smile. "It used to be curly. I hope it all comes back."

Both boys say cancer has tested their faith and determination.

"At first I was scared, but I keep my hopes up by praying to God and try not to be negative," Angel said. "If I am negative, my mom says not to be. She tries to get me going."

Vicky Carrillo is thankful she has Teresa Gonzalez to lean on.

"I told Vicky she had to believe in God and his plan," Teresa said. "Sometimes the diagnoses the doctors give us are really difficult to accept. But you have to keep the faith and confidence in him."

The future for Alexis is promising. He will undergo an MRI, CT scan and CAT scan June 1 and 7.

"They want to make sure the tumor in the pelvis is gone and all the cancer cells are gone," Teresa Gonzalez said.

As for Angel, he will continue to be hospitalized.

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"His defenses are real low so we can't tell right now," said Vicky Carrillo, who has not left her son's side since March. "He was doing chemo every week. Now it's every other week. We are waiting to see if he is going to need a bone marrow transplant."

Cancer created the bond between Alexis and Angel.

"I think we will be friends forever," Alexis said. "What are the chances of us both having cancer at that same time?"

This ordeal has inspired Angel to do what he can to make battling cancer easier for other children.

"Once I beat this thing I want to help other people and keep their hopes up to get better and not to be down on themselves," he said.

That is the same advice Alexis has given Angel.

"I never felt depressed or sorry for myself," Alexis said. "You have to have a positive outlook and things will work out for the best."

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To help

Two separate accounts have been set up to help with medical expenses for Alexis Gonzalez and Angel Carrillo:

- For Alexis, contact Bank of America. There is an account in the name of Alexis Gonzalez.
- For Angel, an account has been set up at Government Employees Credit Union. It is account No. 530509.







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