

SHE'S GOT *Spirit* (YES, SHE DOES)

Their eyes say it all. Tiffany Kuehl's are tear-filled, flooded with concern for her daughter. Crystal Kuehl's are steely, reflecting determination and a tenacious spirit.

Crystal, 21, was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer in March 2013 at age 20. She spent the past summer fighting for her life.

Crystal thinks only positive thoughts. And she dances – with a newfound passion for life and a greater wisdom about how precious each day is. She spends each day at the C.R. Spirits studio, dancing and teaching with Tiffany, who founded the dance team and studio in 1993.

“The kind of neuroendocrine cancer she had is called an insulinoma. These arise from a particular cell type in the pancreas called an islet cell. They are phenomenally rare, and studies suggest that only one person out of 250,000 per year will develop this kind of cancer,” says Deb Wilbur, MD, a medical oncologist at Mercy's Hall-Perrine Cancer Center.

“New Year's Eve (2012) was the last day I remember feeling good,” remembers Crystal. “Then I started getting really sweaty and feeling weak, but I thought it was because of the overload of going to school (at Kirkwood Community College) plus dancing and teaching.”

She saw Jennifer Forkner, ARNP, at Family Physicians of Cedar Rapids, where she has been a patient since birth. When blood work revealed her sugars were low, Jennifer initially thought Crystal was hypoglycemic. So, Crystal began eating more and more – up to every hour.

But Crystal's symptoms continued to get worse and she started to look bloated. Tiffany told her, “you don't look right.” Her grandma agreed and even her dad said she looked puffy. Initially hurt by their comments, Crystal later confessed she had numbness in her fingers and had been feeling mentally “spaced out.”

Tiffany brought Crystal back to the office where they saw Mark Goedken, MD, who ordered a CT scan and did more blood work. The Kuehls had a family vacation to Panama City coming up and he encouraged them to go, noting that the results wouldn't be back for a while.

Crystal didn't have any fun on vacation. She says, “My body just wouldn't work. It was even getting hard to eat.” They would soon know why.

Dr. Goedken called while they were on vacation and said Crystal needed to have an MRI as soon as they got back. After the MRI, he called Crystal and asked her to come in the next morning, on March 27. A busy student, Crystal protested. But Dr. Goedken insisted that this was more important than school, so she called her teachers to let them know she would be missing class – again.



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