

Rhyan Wilcox thought her life had ended before it had even begun when she was diagnosed with non-Hodgkin's lymphoma during her freshmen year of college. But five years later, Rhyan is a thriving college graduate.

Rhyan's journey with cancer started in 2005, one week before her first semester finals. Rhyan underwent emergency surgery to repair intussusception, a disorder in which part of the intestine – either the small intestine or colon – slides into another part of the intestine. This often blocks the intestine, preventing food or fluid from passing through. Intussusception also cuts off the blood supply to the part of the intestine that's affected.

The post-surgery pathology reports came back indicating that Rhyan had non-Hodgkin's Lymphoma. "I didn't even know what it was or what it meant; all I knew was that it made my parents cry," says Rhyan.

After recovering from surgery, Rhyan and her family drove back to her home in Syracuse, NY, where her and her family went to a local oncologist. "My parents tried to find the one that was best for me, but they were overwhelmed and in over their heads," says Rhyan. It was then that a relative called and told her parents about a commercial they saw for the Cancer Treatment Centers of America (CTCA).

"This was the first of many miracles in my journey."

Unlike most 18 years old who bring in the New Year with friends and celebrations, Rhyan brought in the New Year with the confirmation of a stage IV non-Hodgkin's lymphoma diagnosis. However, Rhyan and her care team were ready to fight the disease.

After meeting with her hematologist-oncologist, Istvan Redei, MD, director of the stem cell transplant and cell therapy program, Rhyan began an aggressive treatment regimen. Rhyan braved five, 96-hour long chemotherapy treatments every 21 days. "Since I was in the hospital for 5 days at a time, I got to know the Stem Cell Unit staff very well," says Rhyan who considers the CTCA stem cell unit staff an extension of her family.

Like any young adult, Rhyan sought advice from those close to her. Her nurses and care team became like family to her, offering her advice and perspective on what was best for her – including advice on boys. "And Dr. Redei, what can I say, he saved my life," says Rhyan, who came to be known as 'Baby Rhyan' by the CTCA staff.

During her treatment, Rhyan and her family stayed at Guest Quarters for five months in Zion near the hospital, where Rhyan and her family met other patients who have become lifelong friends. "Something that made CTCA special was that everyone was there for the same reason. This made me, a bald 18-year old, feel so comfortable – I never had to be bothered with unwanted stares. We were a community, all fighting the same fight," says Rhyan.

Although ready to move on after she completed treatment, Rhyan describes going home as a bittersweet experience.

“How was I supposed to have a normal life after this? I wanted this experience to stay with me, but I also wanted to move on with my life.”

And so she did. Rhyan went back to college and graduated with honors despite missing the spring semester of her freshman year. She earned her Bachelors Degree in Wildlife Conservation and now serves as Wildlife Inspector for the United States Fish and Wildlife Service in Tampa, FL.

“My journey was an incredible one. It taught me about myself and has given me perspective on the day-to-day ups and downs of life. It gave me the chance to build lifelong friendships. I never regret getting cancer; it has changed my life for the better in so many ways. I try to live each day to the fullest since I was given a second chance,” says ‘Baby Rhyan’.

Four years after her last treatment, Rhyan went skydiving. She has since hiked to the top of many peaks and viewed nature’s wonders. Rhyan looks forward to advancing her career, buying her first home with the love of her life, and most importantly, living a long and healthy live.

“I encourage others to ‘GO LIVE LIFE’ for tomorrow is promised to no one.”