FRANCESCA ZOMKOWSKI

Francesca Zomkowski graduated from Burlington Central High School where she participated in musicals, concerts, and plays. Francesca’s participation in singing groups continues here at NIU. Francesca is considering English, linguistics, and history as fields of study in her undergraduate experience at NIU. “Final Facts” is about Francesca’s uncle, and she enjoyed writing this moving story, for it shows the “power of will,” as she says. Francesca hopes to inspire people, regardless of the career she enters.

Francesca wrote her essay in Andrea Fryling's English 103 course during the fall of 2010.
Humans contract many unfortunate and tragic diseases; some are easily treated and common, others are hopeless and fatal. This is a sad fact, but true nonetheless. Another fact: many people are not exposed to the effects of fatal disease for the good part of their lives. They have instilled in their heads that the horrific stories they hear on the news and on TV could never be their reality. Fact Number Three: disease can happen to anyone, anywhere, at any time. Such was the case with my uncle, Gene, fifteen years ago.

Gene was diagnosed with cancer at the age of forty-nine. Like most average citizens of the U.S., he did not suspect that there was a dreadful and silent plague slowly forming inside his body, eating away at his health with every passing day. In fact, he observed that something was abnormal quite by accident. When I asked him how exactly he came to suspect that he was the victim of this often-incurable disease, he told me, “I just saw blood coming from me, so I thought, well, something is wrong.” He immediately visited his doctor, who concurred with his earlier conclusion and sent him directly to the hospital. After some tests and a few days of waiting, Gene received the bad news: he had colon cancer.

Imagining one’s reaction to this type of update is easy, and my uncle reacted as most people would; his whole world screeched to a halt. At that point, he was living in a lovely house with a beautiful family, totally content with his life. He was crushed. When I asked him to elaborate on his feelings after he received the news, he was very matter-of-fact. He informed me, “If someone says, ‘You have cancer,’ especially a doctor, you feel like you’re almost dead. You know what I mean. It’s a terrible feeling; you feel just terrible. It’s a death sentence.” Here, he whistled down a few notes, gesturing with his hand as if something was falling. ‘Bye-bye! They took me on the [operating] table immediately, because it was just really bad, really progressed. They made the operation right then.”

Once they had finished removing as much of the malignancy as possible, Gene’s doctor stated that the cancer had advanced and that he would need chemotherapy sooner rather than
later. With that news, my uncle expressed that he felt hopeless. The thought that he was dying finally hit him. He lay in the hospital for a week, recovering and mulling over his life before this sickness. At this point, it is only natural for humans to drown in the growing despair that accompanies coming death. One can understand how hard it can be to do the opposite. However, Gene would not let himself slip under these metaphorical waters.

“You know what I was thinking after a week in the hospital?” my interviewee asked me. “I decided I have to be a strong man, because I have these little kids, ten and twelve, that I love so much, and if I die, everybody’s gonna die, in a way. That’s the point. If you are a really strong guy and everyone gives you the sentence to death…” He trailed off thoughtfully, as if he wanted to find the best way to phrase this. “They told me I had cancer and that I had three months to live. And I said, ‘No, absolutely not, I’m gonna be over here and fighting with this Mother F***** for the rest of my life, and I must win, absolutely.’ So I think not chemo, not anything—I think love for my kids and my wife was the winner, really.”

Many cancer survivors would agree with Gene’s beliefs. What they would not be able to relate to, however, was the type of chemotherapy that he had to undergo. My uncle was the second man in the entire country and one of only twenty people around the world to be chosen to partake in this clinical trial, because he was sound in the other aspects of his physical health. He was also at the right age for this treatment to work. He described what the process was like and how it differed from the standard treatment. “I died every day because this certain chemo was so terrible. But I was fighting and crying every day, which no one saw. Not my kids, not my wife. But I was fighting like a bull, and I think I’m a winner.” My uncle clearly defied the odds.

As most people know, chemotherapy turns an already sick individual into a sicker one. Gene continued to tell me about the painstaking process this special chemo, in addition to normal chemo, put him through. He had to sit motionless for four hours while the medics continuously injected the chemo substance into his veins. “Sometimes, I just wanted to walk away,” he told me. He went on to describe how the chemicals in his body severely messed with his senses. “I saw two colors. My right eye saw everything in red, and my left eye saw blue. I saw the world through those two
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colors. It was terrible. I don’t know what happened, but this chemo makes me psycho!” Hearing him laugh after describing such a dark ordeal was pleasant.

The chemo also altered his sense of smell and taste. My uncle grew to hate showers because he could smell metal in the water. “I can’t tell you what kind of smell it was: it was the first time in my life I smelled something like that… it smelled like aluminum or steel.” He also told me that the only reason he really ate anymore was because he “had to. The only thing I could taste was pepper,” he explained. Aside from that, he had acquired an ever-lasting craving for grapefruit and ate it as often as he could, because he suddenly desired it when he began taking chemo.

Eventually, the new chemo took a toll on Gene. Though he only had to take the special treatment once a week, it stopped him from going to work. Additionally, when he took the standard treatments, they made him feel ghastly when he attended his job. In his opinion, though, this was not a good enough excuse to stay home and act like a dying person. He resolved to continue being a provider for his family.

His wife and children were doing well for a family that had just been struck with such misfortune. My two cousins were young at the time, and while they knew their father was very sick, they did not realize just how sick he was. It stayed that way. The doctor pointed out that Gene’s time on Earth was supposed to be coming to an end, and he wanted to send a child psychiatrist to his house to prepare the children. This did not sit well with my uncle, as he was determined to fight the cancer and stay with his family for much longer than predicted. He blatantly told the psychiatrist that his services would not be needed because he was not going anywhere. He was, of course, correct.

Unlike her children, my aunt Grace was aware of everything. Though she was heartbroken and scared, Gene reassured her and encouraged her not to worry, because he had decided to stay, no matter what anyone said. When I asked him about her reaction, he told me, “She was with me, at the hospital, sleeping by me. She was always with me. If I spent ten days at the hospital, she was ten days at my side.” Then he mentioned my mother, another prominent helper in his time of need. “And your mom, my sister, was beautiful too. She helped me a lot. She helped me just like my wife did, that’s why I love her. She was nice, and I’ll
never forget that.” With supporters like that, Gene grew even stronger. After a year of taking chemotherapy, he decided to stop.

His doctor reluctantly agreed to simply monitor Gene’s body for a few months and see what would happen. When nothing did, even the company providing him with the special chemo was shocked. They ran tests on him that came up negative, indicating that their procedure had worked, though he had chosen to stop it prematurely. Gene’s checkups were scheduled for every few months, which eventually turned into annual visits. After a year and a half had gone by, his doctor told him that if he could continue this way for seven years, he was going to be free. “Those were the longest seven years of my entire life. But after those seven years, nothing happened, and I’m still here. And now, after fifteen, I am a survivor,” my uncle told me. “After the first couple of years, the doctor told me, ‘This is something beautiful! I think you are a very strong person, and I think that’s it. It’s not a miracle.’”

To this day, Gene still visits that doctor every two years for a check-up. No one knows the reaction his body may yet have to the chemicals. However, Gene feels fantastic at sixty-four years old. He is healthy, working, and happier than ever. “One thing I can say is, before I got cancer, I was like ‘Be careful! Don’t spill on the carpet!’ Now, everything is changed, and I am not so picky. The best days I have now are when I go outside to see the sun, and I thank God that he gave me another beautiful day.” However, as a survivor, Gene’s outlook has changed a bit; he told me, “If someone says at my job, ‘Can you stay later? Make more money?’ I say right away, ‘No, life is beautiful. I don’t give a sh** about another few bucks. I once saw this white skeleton that said ‘Come on, to us!’ but I said ‘No, no!’ And now, after fifteen years, I stay with you guys. No overtime for me.’”

My uncle has been through one of the worst diseases known to man. It had taken a toll on his body and mind. Amazingly, he fought through it and came out on top. I asked him one final question: how did having cancer change his life and him as a person? “I think I understand right now that love, my kids and wife, my love for my family... I think it is stronger than anything else. And if you love somebody, you can do whatever you want; you can even die, or you can live.” Gene is living proof that facts are not always final.