

The Palm Beach Post

It's brave boy vs. cancer

For the parent of a cancer-stricken boy, there's but one desperate, overriding thought: "He just has to survive."

That's been Summer Orton-Smith's mantra since late October, when the Palm Beach Gardens massage therapist and her former husband, Steven Smith, were faced with the unthinkable: Their 5-year-old son Brock had a large, malignant brain tumor pressing against his brain stem.

He needed immediate surgery.

"We were numb, in shock, just going on autopilot. We didn't even have time to be scared," recalls Orton-Smith, 33, of the early days that would turn her life upside-down.

Little Brock's medical ordeal began in August. An avid baseball player ("He and his 8-year-old brother Brody were at the field every day," Orton-Smith says), Brock was excited to begin kindergarten. But early in the school year, something was clearly amiss.

"At least a couple of times per week, he'd vomit while in class," Orton-Smith explains. "He'd have no other symptoms and feel fine afterward. "

Eventually, the episodes became more frequent. So by late September, Brock was being examined by a variety of pediatric specialists. "All of his bloodwork and food-allergy testing came back normal, as did an endoscopic exam," Orton-Smith says.

At this point, Dr. John Stephens, a pediatric gastroenterologist, made the decision that, says Orton-Smith, "saved my son's life": He ordered a full-body CAT scan.

That test, performed on a Monday (Oct. 24), revealed a mass on Brock's brain. "Two days later, he was being operated on," Orton-Smith says. The surgery, performed by Dr. Neil Patel at St. Mary's Medical Center, lasted 11 hours.

Brock's tumor was completely excised - but his recovery and rehabilitation will be long and arduous.

Due to cerebral mutism, "He hasn't been able to say a word since the operation," Orton-Smith explains. "He did all his communicating at first by turning his thumb up or down."

Brock spent more than a month at St. Mary's before being transferred last week to Joe DiMaggio Children's Hospital in Hollywood. There, he'll undergo several hours daily of in-patient physical, occupational and speech therapy.

He also has just begun the first round of what will be at least a yearlong protocol of radiation and chemotherapy. The resilient youngster, who never cries or complains, won't be able to return to kindergarten until August 2013 at the earliest.

"Brock needs to relearn how to walk, speak, swallow, brush his teeth, tie his shoes everything," Orton-Smith says. "Thankfully, his memory seems to be unaffected."

What has - and will continue to be - affected are Orton-Smith's living arrangements . For as long as Brock is at Joe DiMaggio, Orton-Smith will be unable to work because she'll be at his bedside, or with him in therapy during the week.

On weekends, Steven, who owns and operates Admiral's Black Transport, stays in the hospital.

In the meantime, Orton-Smith tries to make up for lost time with Brody: "It's a juggling act because we're trying to keep Brody's life as normal as possible."

Further complicating matters for the foursome is that, from 2001 to 2008, they lived in The Acreage - the area where The Palm Beach Post has reported extensively about pediatric brain-cancer cases (Brock's tumor is the 14th known case).

Orton-Smith says that the oncologists who've analyzed Brock's tumor have a strong suspicion that the growth wasn't congenital, but rather caused by external factors. Just to be safe, Brock's doctors have prescribed CAT scans for Steven, Brody and Orton-Smith.

Needless to say, Brock's medical and rehabilitation bills (even with insurance coverage) have already reached crushing proportions.

As painful and heart-wrenching as this hardship has been, Orton-Smith is forever grateful to "all of our family and friends for the incredible support they've given us. We feel their love every day."

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