



Beating the odds

Sophomore makes miraculous recovery from life-threatening illness

LONDON HUDSON

Reporter

Sophomore Hanna Rinkevicz lays back on the couch with a smile on her face. A tub of animal crackers rests next to her feet, which are propped up on the family's wooden coffee table.

Movie cases and hair ties clutter the table's surface as Rinkevicz cracks sarcastic remarks about all the television she's watched recently.

Typical Hanna- always joking.

However, nearly three months ago, it was a different story.

On Feb. 22, Hanna was diagnosed with a life-threatening illness that put her in a coma and almost took her life.

What started out as the common flu worsened within a few hours into viral encephalitis- a rare virus that causes swelling of the brain.

Hanna had taken a few days off of school for what seemed like an extreme case of the flu.

"It was very debilitating," Rinkevicz said. "It was the worst flu I ever had. I laid in bed for three days straight."

When her mom, Christy, went into her room to check on her early Saturday morning, Hanna's condition took a turn for the worse. Hanna had a seizure.

"She was sick, but talking to me," Christy said. "I went in 20 minutes later and she was unconscious. I could not wake her."

As Christy dialed for the ambulance, she went into survival mode. She remained at Hanna's side on the way to Helen DeVos Children's Hospital, praying for God to watch over her daughter.

Christy said Hanna was delirious in the E.R. and eventually slipped into a 10-day coma while being admitted at DeVos.

Hanna first woke up nearly a week later, for only about 30 seconds. This became a trend for the next four to five days.

"It was a nightmare that I could not wake from and every day I would wait for that 30 seconds," Christy said. "The rest of the day was pure anguish."

During those days, Christy would read to Hanna, talk to her, brush her hair, exercise her legs, and pray.

"Doctors were uncertain if Hanna would wake from the coma and what her condition would be if she did wake," Christy said. "(They) continued to say that it would be months of a very slow recovery."

The swelling was most prevalent on her thalamus- the part of the brain that deals with a body's sensory awareness, states of consciousness and also controls sleep.

On day nine of her coma, Hanna was moved to Mary Free Bed Rehabilitation Hospital, where she was expected to recover for the next eight weeks.

On her third day there, Hanna surprised everyone as she stayed awake for an hour. Although she fatigued easily, Christy was reassured when she showed Hanna a picture of her best friend and Hanna responded by making a light joke.

"She said she didn't know and acted very confused," Christy said. "I told her that it was Brooke in the picture and Hanna kept insisting that she didn't know Brooke. I finally said, it's Brooke Nichols, one of your best friends. To which Hanna replied, 'Yeah, mom, I'm just messing with you.' That smart aleck remark made me realize that she was going to be okay."

For the next few days, Hanna tried to piece together her situation and surroundings, asking about her friends, sister, and the basketball team.

"I thought it was a dream," Hanna said. "I asked about basketball and my mom said basketball season was over. I thought she was lying."

Hanna, a forward on the varsity team, had already missed the majority of the season due to a heel injury. The coma forced her to miss the rest of the season. This left her feeling guilty.

"I missed my team and playing basketball, since I had just recovered from my Achilles injury and was cleared to play," Hanna said. "I really wanted to be there to support all of them in the post season games."

The team decided to wear Hanna's initials and a heart on the back of their socks and wrists as motivation during their district tournament game against Grand Rapids Union.



Maisy Hoffman THE BUCS' BLADE

Hanna continues to keep a positive outlook. "When I found out I could have died it made me reevaluate my life," Hanna said.

"We thought by doing that it would always remind us to play for her, and that there was a bigger picture than playing the basketball game itself or the district tournament," senior captain Taylor Craymer said.

Hanna's attitude, inner strength, and physical abilities helped her heal quickly.

Doctors originally estimated a long road filled with months of daily outpatient therapy.

Her time at Mary Free Bed went by slowly as she had seven hours of physical, recreational, occupational, and speech therapy each day. From practicing how to sit up and down, riding a recumbent bike and swimming, to relearning basic words, Hanna was able to pick up normal activities in a handful of days.

Hanna's doctors from DeVos visited her whenever she had a change in medicine dosage. According to Christy, they were amazed that this was the same girl. Only a week earlier she was battling a near fatal disease.

Contrary to her doctors' previous predictions, Hanna was determined to beat the odds and make a full recovery.

"I didn't know the severity of what I had until I was much further into the recovery process," Hanna said. "I was frustrated that simple things like walking were difficult for me but I felt lucky that I was progressing so quickly and nothing too damaging happened to me."

A week and a half later, Hanna was moved again. This time, to her house.

Trading the hospital bed for her own bed, Hanna was escorted out by her dad's colleagues from the Grand Rapids Fire Department on March 12.

Balloons and gifts laid on her front porch welcomed Hanna home. These were soon followed by emotional visits from friends and family.

"I got so many prayers and letters and cards from people and that was so great and people wanted to visit me," Hanna said. "I just felt very appreciated and loved. Mainly I'm just thankful for the community and how they supported me."

The Rinkevicz family is grateful for all of the support from around the community, helping them through this emotional experience.

"For anyone who wonders if their prayers for a sick loved one matters, I'm here to say that it not only matters, but can make the difference in someone's life," Christy said. "It made a difference in ours."

Nearly 600 encouraging messages were posted on Hanna's

"I felt lucky that I was progressing so quickly and nothing too damaging happened to me."
-sophomore Hanna Rinkevicz

Care Page by relatives, friends, and community members. They were confident in her recov-

ery and positive about news of progress.

According to Christy, Hanna spent the month after her return receiving therapy to improve her strength and memory. From her last neurological appointment, her doctors are seeing hardly any residual effects from the virus.

However, it will be a few months for the inflammation to fully go down. Hanna will have a magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) taken as well as a cognitive test in July at Devos Children's.

While resting at home, Hanna received homework help from math teacher Joe Nelson to help prepare for her eventual return to school.

"She's really self-driven which, in this situation, couldn't have been more helpful because she was able to keep up and do a lot of work on her own," Nelson said. "I'd just brush up on some of the things with her."

Hanna returned to school immediately after spring break, on April 14. A little anxiously, she walked right back into her advanced placement and honors classes as if nothing happened. Friends and classmates were excited to see her smiling face once again.

"When I found out I could have died it made me reevaluate my life," Hanna said. "Things that I thought mattered before didn't matter so much anymore. I became so much more grateful for my faith, family, and friends."

Despite her ordeal, she continues to smile.

"It's fun not being dead." Hanna said with a laugh.

Typical Hanna- always joking.

The Hanna Files

Favorite Ice Cream
Flavor:
Moosetracks

Favorite Subject:
History

Favorite Movie:
Harry Met Sally

Favorite Pizza
Topping:
Onions