



TRUE TEEN STORY

Sharing photos helped Karli feel less alone as she battled cancer. You can follow her on Instagram: [Karli1998](#)

Vocabulary

cancer: a serious disease in which some cells in the body multiply too fast and cause harm

chemotherapy: the use of strong chemicals to treat someone who has cancer

tumor: a lump on the body that is not normal

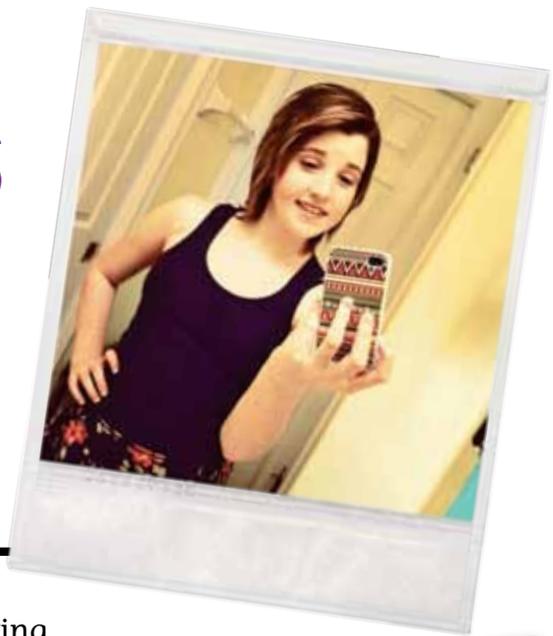
amputate: to cut off all or part of an arm or leg

declared: said to be, announced

COURTESY OF KARLI LEONARD

Karli Has Cancer

A brave 14-year-old shares the story of her battle against a deadly disease.



Karli photographed all kinds of things to post on Instagram—even her nail polish!

and unsure how to behave under the circumstances, but it was still painful.

In the Hospital

Missing school was difficult too. During my treatments, I spent more than 100 days in the hospital. I missed my entire seventh-grade year. My treatment started with **chemotherapy**. Six months later, I had

My name is Karli, and this is my story.

It started with a hard knot in my lower left calf when I was 12. My mother and I both assumed it was merely a pulled muscle, but from my doctor's facial expression when he examined it, we understood that something was terribly wrong.

Bad News

The doctor sent me for a test, the results of which indicated that I probably had **cancer**.

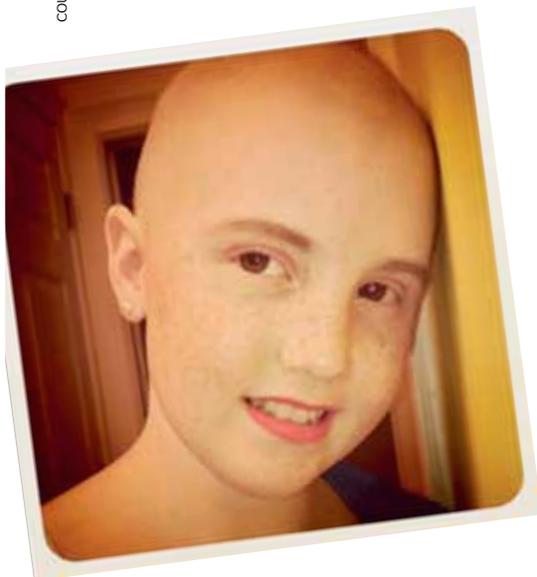
More extensive testing revealed that I had osteosarcoma (AH-stee-oh-sahr-KOH-muh), a type of bone cancer that typically develops during adolescence.

I wasn't especially shocked by this information. I didn't even cry! Two of my grandparents had previously been diagnosed with cancer, so I knew the drill. I was like, "Let's just do this and get it out of my body!"

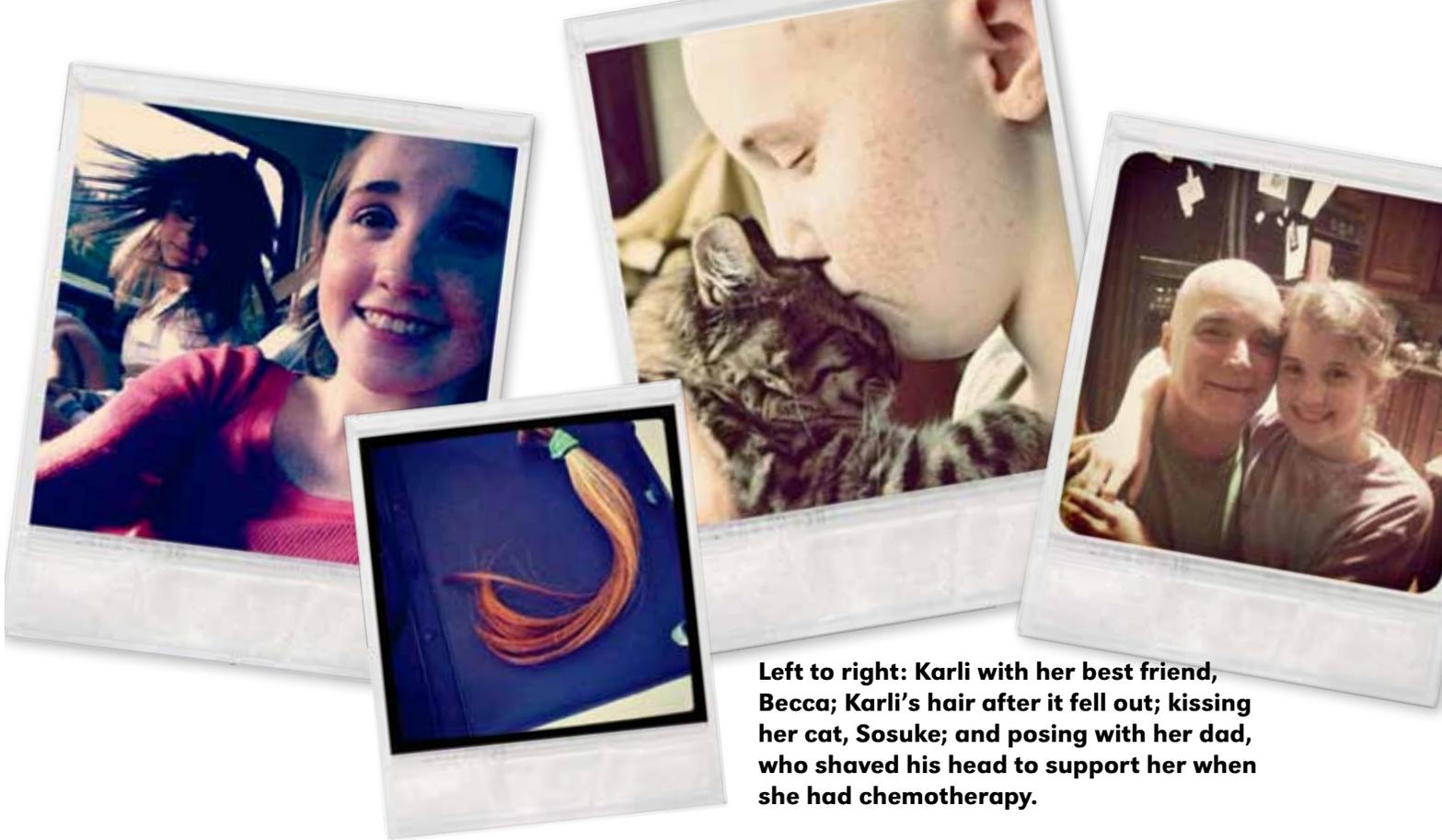
Talking About It

I told a few close friends, who then asked my permission to tell someone else. Eventually, most of the school knew. People were generally very supportive, sending flowers and cards. One girl I didn't even know that well raised \$100 for me at her church!

However, some friends became increasingly distant after hearing the news. I realize that they were probably just uncomfortable



Chemotherapy made Karli's hair fall out. It has since grown back.



Left to right: Karli with her best friend, Becca; Karli's hair after it fell out; kissing her cat, Sosuke; and posing with her dad, who shaved his head to support her when she had chemotherapy.

an operation to remove the **tumor** from my leg.

I had handled everything well until then, but lying on the hospital bed right before my operation was the most terrifying moment of my life. I didn't know what the doctors would discover, or if they would have to **amputate** my leg.

Fortunately, when I regained consciousness, I learned that they'd removed the entire tumor successfully, and it hadn't spread to other parts of my body.

They did have to remove part of a bone from my calf. Since it was just a support bone, I can still walk, but I'll never again be able to do anything that puts excessive strain on my leg.

I think I'll always miss being able to run around.

Returning to School

In eighth grade, I returned to school. I was using crutches because of the surgery, and I wore a cap everywhere because the chemotherapy had caused my hair to fall out.

People would often look at me strangely in the hallway. I wished they would just approach me and ask a question.

Everyone thinks that because you had this terrible disease, you're fragile and can't handle anything—but cancer survivors are remarkably strong. We're tenacious, and we can do anything that we put our minds to.

A Stronger Person

This past August, I celebrated the one-year anniversary of my last chemotherapy treatment. I'm still required to have examinations every six months for the next four years. I won't be officially **declared** cancer-free until I'm 18.

It helps to know that I'm a better person because of this experience. I still feel like an ordinary teenager in many ways, but my perspective is different than it was before.

I get angry when people say things like, "I'm having such a bad day that I just want to die." Life is way too short. I'll never waste another minute worrying about the little things.

COURTESY OF KARLI LEONARD (ALL IMAGES)