

NO SURRENDER

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Lauren Krelshem with some of the 20,000 paper cranes sent to her last year for her 21st birthday.

Twice Lauren Krelshem beat off leukemia, but when it returned for a third time the young Adelaide woman was determined it wouldn't stop her chasing her dream of being an actress

Not all battles begin with big explosions – some start so quietly you don't realise you're under attack. So it was with Lauren Krelshem.

When her nose began to bleed one day in early 2015 she barely gave it a second thought. But when it lasted an hour, her father Michael decided she needed a doctor.

Krelshem was then 20, and had already fought leukemia twice in her young life – at age seven and then again at 13. For years the aspiring Adelaide actor had believed that war was over, and she had won.

But then the tests after that bloody nose came back. The leukemia was not beaten, the fight was not over, and her life was once again in the balance.

“It wasn’t until I got wheeled up to the ward where you see the Cancer Council and Leukaemia Foundation and CanTeen pamphlets on the wall that I was like ‘oh, it’s this again,’” she recalls. “Basically, I was told (by doctors) at 20 years old, I had to go into palliative care. I just remember being like ‘no, nup, that can’t be right’ because I had all these dreams and ambitions and I haven’t really lived life yet.”

That was February 2015. Fast forward to today and Krelshem, now 21, is cancer free thanks to a revolutionary treatment.

A pixie haircut, inspired by her acting idol Jennifer Lawrence, of *The Hunger Games* fame, is the only outward sign of her most recent, and hopefully last, cancer battle.

Emotional scars run deeper but they have only made her stronger. Krelshem’s steely resilience, unwavering strength and resolve are a testament beyond her 21 years. She’s been through blood test after test, surgeries, multiple rounds of chemotherapy, a bone marrow transplant and, finally, cutting edge therapy that has saved her life.

That fight has been well-documented in the media. Including the drive from Krelshem’s family, friends and complete strangers, including actor Luke Hemsworth and Australian comedy duo Hamish and Andy, who helped fold her 20,000 paper cranes because a Japanese legend says if you make 1000 cranes, you get one wish.

She’s recorded good days and bad days through an online blog, called laurenkupdates, and says her dreams of becoming a silver screen actress were almost shattered when doctors told her the disease had returned last year. But Krelshem says the news only made her more determined to live out her dream.

“It’s a roller-coaster of emotions because you go through stages – I got really angry because I realised ‘oh crap, no school, no acting’, then it was denial and then sadness – you go through everything,” she says.

“It’s different everyday how you cope with those feelings. You simply take it and you can either choose to look at it in the positive light or the negative light – you have to do what you have to do to survive.”

A sliver of hope in the form of cutting edge CAR T-Cell therapy gave her the lifeline she had been looking for. “My dad said ‘hang on, I’ve heard about things overseas,’” she explains. So this year Krelshem became the first person outside the US to receive the treatment, in Melbourne.

The therapy works by removing a patient’s immune cells, sending them to the US to be genetically modified into “normal” disease fighting cells, and then placing them back into the patient. After her cells were removed late last year, the modified cells were placed back in her body in February.

“I reckon it was four days I felt like I had a really bad case of the flu and just felt disgusting but then after those four days, I was like ‘OK cool, can I get out of bed now?’,” she says. This month, scans could not find any cancer cells.

“I remember I had this Scottish registrar and he comes over looking really sulky and sad and he’s got the piece of paper in his hand and I’m sitting there going ‘this is it, it hasn’t worked,’” she says. “He gives me the sheet ... and I’m just like ‘oh, you little bastard’ and started crying in front of him, and he said ‘you’re cancer free’.

“People don’t understand once you’re cancer free doesn’t mean you’re suddenly better – I’m only just starting to get back to normal life.” There’s been plenty of support, from friends, family and also CanTeen, an organisation which supports young people and their families living with cancer.

In October, she’s throwing her support behind this year’s DBH Road Raise, a charity ride from Adelaide to Melbourne which aims to raise \$150,000 for CanTeen. As ambassador for the ride, Krelshem will cheer on the riders from the race cars and she’s looking to cycle next year’s event.

"It's always been on my bucket list to do a charity ride somewhere, so I thought what better way to support a charity I'm so passionate about," she says. "They have been by my side every step of the way."

Forced to give up acting when she got sick, Krelshem's already looking to the future. "I know exactly where I hope to be in five years time (but) I find it really hard to say," she says. "I really hoping that I'm doing a lot of screen and film work and I'm on my way to becoming the best actress I can be." •

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