

# Typically teen?

## Steven Grange's battle with cancer...at 16.

by karin greenberg

When Steven Grange opened the front door, his healthy demeanor took me by surprise. I was warmed by this six foot tall, 20-year-old's smile and impressed by his manners. As he led me through the kitchen and towards the rectangular wooden table where we would sit, he moved with the confidence and energy of someone in the prime of his life. Before hearing the details of his heartbreaking experience, I would not have guessed that such a boy had endured horrific pain and unspeakable anguish that so easily could have broken him. It was impossible for me to know, upon that first glance, that after talking to this young man for 2½ hours, I would undeniably understand why he was considered a hero, not only by his family and friends, but by anyone who had the pleasure of crossing his path.

It was a typical Saturday in early December of 2005. Steven, sixteen years old at the time, spent the day playing football with friends. He'd been feeling rundown since Thanksgiving and late that afternoon, his fatigue still lingered. He ignored it, as he had for weeks, until he noticed a lump on his neck that night in the shower. Having heard that swollen glands were a common symptom of mononucleosis, he was convinced that was what he had. On Sunday, his mom, Regina, joking with her son about who he had been making out with, brought him to the pediatrician, who gave him a thorough examination.

What followed was not the quick, easy assessment that Regina had expected. The doctor, instead of saying it was likely mono and Steven should prepare to get lots of rest, suggested that she take Steven to the ER for a chest x-ray. He told her, in a non-alarming way, that sometimes a swollen lymph node above the collar bone, where Steven's was, can indicate lymphoma, and a chest x-ray was the only way to know more. "I heard the word lymphoma and couldn't even comprehend the fact that my son could have such a horrible disease," says Regina. Immediately slipping into denial, she reassured herself that the doctor was simply doing his duty by covering all bases. "I was sure the x-ray would prove that he had mono or bronchitis or something else — not cancer." Overwhelmed, and given the doctor's okay, Regina and Steven both preferred to push the ER visit to the following day.

At the radiology office the following morning, Regina read her book in the waiting room, refusing to allow herself to think the worst. Once the x-ray was complete, she was put on the phone with the head of her pediatric practice, who told her that they saw something in Steven's chest that needed further examination, and said they

would need to do a head, chest, and abdominal CT scan. When they were done with the scan, he said, she should bring the films with her to his office.

On the way to the pediatrician's office after the tests were all completed, Regina and her son were suspended between what would become before and after worlds. Without a diagnosis, they were still holding on to that sliver of hope that this would all be nothing serious and they would be able to go home and put this scare behind them. What transpired after they parked and walked into the doctor's office, however, catapulted them into an unknown world, one that would change the Grange's lives forever.

The doctor looked at Regina when she entered his office and said, "Sit down, mommy." He calmly went on, "The tests show that Steven has lymphoma." As the doctor began to map out his thoughts in more detail, Regina, completely unhinged from this news, tried to recover from what felt like a punch in her gut. The doctor gave her the address for the Cancer Center for Kids at Winthrop-University Hospital in Mineola, and told her that Dr. Weinblatt, a pediatric oncologist, would be waiting for them there. Going through the motions of what seemed to be an out-of-body experience, Regina called her husband, Tommy, from the car and tried to coherently relay the news to him. Tommy was horrified. "I couldn't quite comprehend what I had just been told," he remembers, "Cancer just didn't equate to kids in my mind, especially not my teenage son." She then called her parents in Florida, Steven's Mama and Pappa, who had an extremely close relationship with their first grandson. They were equally devastated. "They have a very strong bond and attachment to him," says Regina. "And of course my mom was worried about me, as her daughter, going through all of this."

Regina drove her son to the Cancer Center as if in a dream. Upon their arrival at Dr. Weinblatt's office, the doctor sat together with Regina and Steven to review the test results. The CT scan revealed that Steven's neck and chest had several masses, or tumors. Regina, who earlier that day had not even allowed herself to think of the devastating possibilities, was reeling. "You go from your kid playing football on Saturday to Monday — he has cancer," she says. "My comfortable, beautiful world was shattered in a matter of hours." Though he had a feeling that it was Hodgkin's Lymphoma, the doctor explained that they would need to perform a biopsy on a lymph node to confirm it. "I had no idea what that meant," says Steven of the doctor's diagnosis. "I thought I might have the flu or



Think again.



something.” When the doctor explained to him that it was cancer, Steven was in shock. “I’m thinking ‘I’m an athlete, I need to go to practice tomorrow, I can’t have cancer, I have to get my license in a few months, what do you mean I have cancer?’” he remembers.

On the way home from the Cancer Center that night, Steven broke down and cried. “Mom, am I gonna die?” he asked. It was a moment of sheer agony for Regina, whose own tears began to flow freely. She answered, “Not if I have any say in it.” Barely able to contain the thoughts racing through her head, Regina felt a sudden desperate need to pour out every ounce of love that she felt for her son. “I told him I was so very sorry for yelling at him, for punishing him, for anything mean I had ever said to him,” she remembers, “I told him I loved him more than life itself and that he was going to be fine.” She did not tell him of the horrific fear that was plaguing her. “In the back of my mind I was scared to death,” she admits. “I couldn’t even process the thought of my world without Steven.”

They entered their home with heavy hearts, confusion flooding their thoughts. While they could not avoid telling Steven’s sister, Alexandra, 13 at the time, that Steven had to have some tests, they downplayed their fear so they would not frighten her. Without much time to pause, Steven and his parents had to immediately act on whatever the doctor ordered. The next day, after sending Alex to school, they drove to Winthrop University Hospital, where Steven was given a PT scan, pulmonary function test, and a full cardiology workup. After the tests he was admitted to the hospital, where he awaited an early morning surgical biopsy of a lymph node. If the tissue sample they tested during surgery concurred with the lymphoma diagnosis, they would then take a sample of his bone marrow and implant a Mediport into his chest to be used for treatment. “I had no idea what to expect,” Steven says, “I’d never even been to a hospital before.”

Though Steven’s hospital room was large and cheerfully decorated, it could not disguise the gloom that had begun to build within the Granges. Steven, with his parents sitting by his side, took in his unfamiliar surroundings, trying to hide his anxious thoughts about the upcoming procedure. He felt frightened and alone, grasping for something to make sense of what was going on. As the three of them watched TV, he found some encouragement. The Coaches Vs. Cancer Classic Basketball Tournament began airing. As the late college coach, Jim Valvano courageously declared his fight against brain cancer in his famous 1993 ESPY Awards speech, Steven listened to the speech that he had seen many times before and saw it for the first time from an insider’s perspective. From the coach’s words he gained motivation to remain strong. “When I heard that speech, I said ‘I can do this’, I will fight this cancer” he remembers. As his battle intensified, Valvano’s voice would prove to be the driving force Steven used to push through the pain and fear that afflicted him.

The next morning, as the Granges waited for Steven to be taken from his room, the door opened and in walked Mama and Pappa, who unexpectedly came from Florida to be with their grandson. “I had told them to stay put until we had more information,” says Regina. “But seeing them walk into that hospital room was the most wonderful and helpful thing for me.” Steven’s Aunt Stephanie was also there by his side with words of encouragement. The Granges chose not to have Steven’s sister, Alex, there with them, as they were determined to maintain as much normalcy in her life as possible, and were desperate to give their undivided attention to their son. Regina and Tommy were allowed to accompany their son to the holding room outside the OR. Regina soothed her son as best she could. “I told him ‘we’ll get through this, Mommy and Daddy are here, and whatever it takes you will be fine’,” remembers Regina.

When the surgeon was ready, he told them that only one of

them could stay with him as he went into the operating room and was put under anesthesia. Though Regina wanted to go, her husband insisted on being there for his son. Regina gave her son a kiss, and told him, “Steven, I love you, I’ll be right here.” Her son was then wheeled through the doors. Steven tried to be tough. “I wouldn’t show it but I was definitely very scared,” he says. Twenty minutes later the doors swung open and Thomas emerged, crying. “He’s out,” he told his wife. “They’re doing the surgery.” Regina and her husband sat in the hospital coffee shop to try and pass the time. A while later, they came out just as one of Steven’s doctors was walking by on the way back to the Cancer Center across the street. He was holding a bag of test tubes filled with red fluid. Tommy asked him, “Is that Steven’s bone marrow in those tubes?” He confirmed that it was.

After a few hours in the recovery room, the Granges took Steven home, and began the grueling wait for the results. The hope — was that it was, indeed, Hodgkin’s Lymphoma, a form of cancer known to respond well to treatment. “I never thought I would pray for my son to have a certain type of cancer,” says Regina, “but I did.” Tuesday morning, Regina had sent out an email to friends and family members, explaining what was going on. “I know this is a huge amount of information to process, and again I’m sorry for that,” she wrote after detailing Steven’s diagnosis, but we are still waiting for someone to wake us up from this nightmare as well.” She also called a few of Steven’s friends’ mothers to let them know. “I didn’t want to talk to anyone,” says Steven, “I was in my own world, thinking about what was going to happen to me, and I didn’t want to tell people — I didn’t know how to say it.”

On Friday the phone call came: Steven was officially diagnosed with Hodgkin’s Lymphoma Stage 2A. The disease was confined to the neck and chest. Steven’s first chemotherapy appointment was scheduled for the following Tuesday. Regina did her best to return the many phone calls from well-meaning friends and relatives. Often, however, conversations were a source of stress for her. When people quoted statistics about the high survival rate of Hodgkin’s lymphoma and told her how lucky they were to have caught it early, Regina could barely control her anger. “I wanted to smash the phone on the floor,” she says. “Yes, everything quoted to me was true, but my son was not a statistic — he was my baby boy, and he had cancer, and he had to go through chemotherapy and get sicker before he got better, and may have to be in and out of the hospital, and would probably lose his hair and miss out on his junior year at school — so please don’t tell me we’re lucky.”

As the family processed what had hit them, they tried to remain calm and think positively. Steven’s sister Alex did not fully understand yet what was happening. “I really didn’t know anything at all,” she recalls. “We were terming it ‘lymphoma’” says Regina, “We weren’t using the ‘C’ word.” At dinner one night over that weekend, Regina, her husband, and her parents, were discussing chemotherapy. Alex looked at her mother, confused, and asked, “Mommy, why would Steven need chemotherapy?” Regina took a deep breath and explained to her daughter that it was because Steven had cancer. “Cancer!” she exclaimed, “I thought he had lymphoma.” She burst into tears and ran away from the table.

On Monday, Regina and Tommy spent the entire day at the Cancer Center with their son, while doctors and nurses gave them information about the type of treatment he would receive, the classification of his disease, and their expectations for recovery. Though the Granges were grappling with the surreal feeling of what was happening to them, they were helped tremendously by the staff at the Cancer Center. From the moment they walked in, they were treated with kindness and respect. Sharon Coritsidis, the nurse

practitioner at the center, stresses how important it is to make the patients feel comfortable. "They walk in here and don't know us from a hole in the wall," she says. "Here they are, having a stranger doing all these invasive procedures to them — we have to make them feel like they're one of the family." Steven's memories of that day have been blocked out completely. "I don't remember anything about it," he says. "He was very unemotional that day," remembers Regina.

As he prepared for his first chemo treatment on Tuesday, Steven followed the doctor's orders to be well-hydrated. "I remember pounding down Gatorade that morning," he says. A healthy, fit, athlete, he was nervous about losing his strength. "I was scared about what this chemo stuff would do to my body," he says. As instructed, his mom rubbed anesthetic cream around the port, covering it with sterile bandages to prevent the medicine from stinging as it entered his body.

For eight hours that day, a day he should have been sitting in classes at high school, Steven sat with an IV dripping chemotherapy drugs into his blood. The nurse hung a new bag on the IV pole each hour, explaining to the Granges the purpose of each medication and its side effects, and giving them a handout with all the information printed on it. "You always have to be honest with adolescents," says Nurse Coritsidis. "they need honesty and someone to tell it like it is — If Steven asked what would happen in a certain scenario, I was 100% honest. We don't whisper around the corners here."

It was a long day for Steven and his parents, but they all tried to stay focused. "I was exhausted after that first day," says Steven. Seeing many young children receiving treatment helped him remain strong. "I was trying my best not to complain," he says. "I saw these

2-and 3-year olds and I would hear them crying and it made me say to myself, 'toughen up, don't be a baby, just get through it.' His strength was evident to all those around him. "He was a tough nut," Nurse Coritsidis comments.

After the first long day of chemo, Steven returned the next day for another four hours, and then on Thursday for two more hours. Friday they went in just to check his blood count. For four days he rested and went back on the eighth day for a "quickie" where they pushed one chemo medication with some Zofran, an anti-nausea drug, into him. For seven to ten days of each cycle, he would receive a shot of Neupogen, which stimulated the production of white blood cells. Oral medication including antibiotics, a steroid to increase the effectiveness of the chemo, and Protonics for relief from acid indigestion was also prescribed. After a two week break, the cycle would start all over again. Steven was classified as a "good responder" and was scheduled for four cycles of chemo.

Shortly after starting his treatment program, Steven began to feel the effects. "Every day I would come home and crash on the couch," he says. "I had no energy to do anything else. He began sleeping on the couch, to be close to the bathroom a few steps away. Though tutors came to the house to help Steven keep up with his schoolwork, they did not push him. "I barely did any work," says Steven, an honors student. "I was in no mood to do schoolwork." The days began to blur together, and as Steven's strength deteriorated, his activities became more and more limited.

Though he was weak, the severity of his reaction to the first cycle of chemo did not disable him completely. His next round of chemo was scheduled for the Tuesday after Christmas, and with the

## WINDOW TREATMENTS

Spring Savings!

# HunterDouglas

Give Your Windows A Makeover & Receive Generous Savings.



Heritage®  
Wooden Shutters

\$100  
OFF\*



Luminette®  
Privacy Sheers

\$100  
OFF\*



Silhouette®  
Window Shadings

\$100  
OFF\*

FREE Shop-At-Home

Days, Evenings & Weekends

- Top Treatments
- Reupholstery
- Draperies
- Bedspreads
- Free Professional Measure & Installation

\*Offer expires 3/31/10, see store for details.

516-739-9800

2172 Jericho Tpke., Garden City Park

visit our website [larrysdesigncenter.com](http://larrysdesigncenter.com)

Larry's  
DESIGN CENTER

Window Treatment Specialist Since 1951

holiday ahead of them, the Granges anticipated the yearly Christmas Eve get-together, which they always hosted at their house. Having lost her 42-year-old sister-in-law on Christmas Eve, and her father-in-law five years later on that night, the date was charged with emotion and meaning for Regina and her family. When Regina discussed it with the oncologist, he was wary about having a houseful of people around Steven. He told her that if Steven's blood count was too low, she just couldn't do it.

On the day before Christmas, Regina and Steven went to the Cancer Center for his blood check. Dr. Weinblatt called them into his office and asked Regina if she still wanted to entertain tomorrow night. "More than anything," she told him. He looked at her, smiling, and said, "It's okay, you can do it." Regina rushed home, decorated the house and began baking, elated that she was able to gather her family together for Christmas Eve. Though Steven stayed in a room downstairs so that he was not too close to the little kids running around, he was comforted knowing he was surrounded by family. In a toast to her son that night, Regina held her glass high and told him how proud she was of him, and that he was keeping them all strong with his courage.

As the weeks passed, and Steven's strength consistently diminished, his self-esteem suffered a blow familiar to many cancer patients: he began to notice that his hair was falling out. At first it was little bits here and there. Then bigger chunks came out in the shower. On New Year's Eve, with Dr. Weinblatt's permission, Steven, who was determined to push himself, planned to go out with some friends. To even out the bald patches that were now visible on his head, Steven's father gave his son a crew cut. Steven went upstairs, showered, and looked in the mirror at his new haircut. He was not satisfied with what he saw. "I remember saying 'this looks ridiculous,'" says Steven, of the patches that were still visible. He picked up his shaving cream and a razor and shaved his entire head.

As he walked down the stairs before going out, his parents were sitting in the living room. Upon seeing her son, his head completely bald, Regina's heart lurched. "He had this great little crew cut when he went up to shower and then he came down like this," she says. "The reality of everything he was going through hit me straight through the heart — I realized then how sick he really was." Though Regina and Tommy told their son how great he looked, and kept smiles on their faces, their insides railed. "I did not want to cry in front of him," says Regina, "so after I told him he looked great, I went into the bathroom and just broke down, sobbing to the point

where I could barely catch my breath." Tommy, too, remembers the moment all too clearly. "Seeing him with no hair hit me like a gust of wind on a freezing cold winter day — it leaves you breathless," he says. "There is nothing that can explain how a parent feels at a moment like that — up until that point the cancer was on the inside and hidden from sight."

Steven, who kept a baseball hat on all night, attempted to have fun with his friends but there was no denying how different things were. "I was being self-conscious all night," he remembers. Though he tried to enjoy himself, the strain was too much. It was the last night he went out with his friends during his months of treatment. "I decided to let my friends go out and have a good time," he says. "I didn't want to be the center of everything, with people wondering why I can't do something or worrying about me. I figured I would catch up with them when I was better."

With each cycle of chemo, Steven's reactions became more severe. First he experienced mild jaw pain and body aches. Then he would begin to get nauseous and have bone pain and loss of appetite. When he was given Prednisone, his appetite increased dramatically. During those times, Steven's grandfather, Pappa, came to the house and cooked all sorts of meals for him, something he loved to do. "My dad couldn't wait for him to be on that drug," jokes Regina. Regina's parents, who normally stayed in Florida all winter, stayed on Long Island throughout Steven's entire treatment period. "They did anything for me," says Steven, "They were always here and that made me feel special."

Steven's other grandma, who was a Eucharist minister at St. James Church, came to the Grange house every Sunday. She said the Our Father prayer over Steven and gave him Communion. Having survived breast cancer four years before, she bonded with Steven over their shared illnesses. Grandma Gina insisted on coming to one day of chemo each cycle, to sit by her grandson's side. "We became a lot closer," Steven says of his relationship with his grandma. When she became sick with pancreatic cancer that April and decided to forego the chemo treatments, she asked Steven if he would be a pallbearer at her funeral. On June 18th she lost her battle. Steven, who did not yet go out without a hat, got special permission from the priest to wear one into the church for the funeral service. But when the Grange's car pulled up to the church, Steven paused, took off his hat, and stepped out of the car. "That was his final tribute to his grandma," says Regina.

In February, when he was in the beginning of his third cycle of chemo, Steven, along with six other patients at the Cancer Center, were invited to attend the Baseball Writers Hall of Fame Dinner in New York City, where Alex Rodriguez would receive the MVP award. The Cy Young Awards, Rookie-of-the-Year Awards, and Manager-of-the-Year Awards would also be presented. Though not feeling great, Steven did not want to pass up this opportunity. "I was excited so I got myself pumped up to go out," he remembers. Sent off in a stretch Cadillac limo, the boys got autographed baseballs, photos with the players, and got to meet Cal Ripken Jr., Chris Carpenter, Huston Street, and many others. "It was a pretty cool thing," says Steven, an avid Yankees fan.

The high from that night did not last long. Shortly after the outing, Steven experienced the worst of his chemo-induced sickness. He was in the midst of his third cycle and in addition to the nausea, fatigue, and aches, his mouth became riddled with sores. "I couldn't even talk it hurt so bad," Steven recounts. Regina tried to nourish him by giving him PediaSure and other liquids. It was hard to get anything into him. He lost a lot of weight and was in severe pain. "He looked very sick for the first time," says Regina. He took Oxycodone as a pain reliever, rinsed his mouth with a prescription



mouthwash, and tried to suck on ice-pops. The sores traveled into his throat and his face was swollen from the steroid.

One night, things were so bad that Steven was crying from the pain. Regina sat on the couch with him, and took her son in her arms, rocking him back and forth. He asked his mom, “Why is this happening to me?” Regina, who saw that her son’s will was finally being broken, had no answers for him. All she could do was comfort him, trying to hold herself together. “I told him to just let it out and cry,” she remembers. “He called himself a warrior but I told him to stop being such a warrior and that it was okay to let his guard down.”

The Granges held on to the bits of hope that were given to them. In an email to her family and friends on February 3, 2006, Regina wrote, “The good news is that Steven has a significant amount of shrinkage of disease in all areas, THANK GOD.” She went on to say, “He continues to have a wonderful and positive attitude, even though he did not feel well for most of the second cycle.” But during her son’s chemo treatments, when she watched him drift off to sleep, feelings of anger would surface. “I couldn’t understand how a perfectly healthy 16-year-old kid in the prime of his life could get sick so fast,” she says. “I was angry with God and thought ‘why couldn’t you let this be me?’”

As months passed without seeing any friends, Steven began feeling the loss of his social life. “I thought about school a lot,” he says, “I missed my friends the most — not being able to see them, and play basketball and baseball, getting my license with them, ring night, social dances — that part was tough, missing all that stuff.” His mother received a phone call one night from the coach of the basketball team he would have been playing on that year. He asked if the team could come over with a pizza. Steven said no: he simply was not well enough.

While the worst part of Steven’s sickness for Regina was watching the physical deterioration of her son’s body, Regina also wrestled with tremendous guilt regarding her daughter. Alex, in the middle of her busy 8th-grade year, was an active teen. Her mom, for the most part, could not be there for her. “My interaction with her ceased to exist once he was diagnosed,” says Regina. “I wasn’t at any of her practices or games.” Thankfully, Regina’s parents were there to take care of Alex whenever she and Tommy were occupied with Steven. A real trooper, Alex never complained about her mother’s absence. “She knew I needed to be with her brother,” Regina says. Alex insists that she did not feel resentment towards her mom.

Vowing to do something for her daughter, Regina signed up for a class trip to New York City, where they would see the show *Wicked*. The day arrived and Steven was going through a terrible bout of sickness. Though Regina wanted to cancel, she knew she had to go for her daughter. Regina’s mother came and stayed with Steven so that Regina could go on the trip as planned. “I sat on that coach bus and cried the whole way into the city,” she remembers. “I was sick about not being there with him.” Once at the show, however, she began to relax and enjoy herself. By the end of the day, she realized how much she had needed to be there. After the show Regina put a smile on her face and gave her full attention to Alex and her friends.

As the end of Steven’s chemo treatments neared, the Granges looked forward to putting the nightmare in the past. They continued to do whatever they could to help Steven through the toughest moments, and braced themselves for the radiation treatments that would follow the chemotherapy. Their morale was strengthened by the knowledge that Steven’s body continued to respond well to his treatment, with his blood count numbers remaining consistent and his tumors shrinking. Alex, who became closer to her brother during his illness, sat and watched movies with him or just talked and hung

out, keeping him company; Regina put everything else in her life on hold; and Tommy brought laughter to his son. “My dad tried to be his normal self around me, joking around,” says Steven. “He was really good — he kept me in high spirits.”



On March 7, 2006, Steven received his final chemotherapy treatment at the Cancer Center. Though Steven and his family were happy it was over, it was hard for them to celebrate given the condition Steven was still in. Regina wrote to her family and friends on March 9th to inform them that he had just undergone his last treatment. “Steven did not fare as well during cycles 3 and 4, and suffered tremendously with different side effects during both these cycles, and unfortunately, is still enduring much pain as I write this. We look forward to the end of this ordeal, and are preparing for the next part of our journey...” About her son she wrote, “he continues to get ME through this, and he is truly my HERO and inspiration.”

March 30th, three weeks after his final chemo session, Steven underwent his first radiation treatment at the radiation center at Winthrop Hospital. For the next four weeks, Monday through Friday, he received the painless dose of radiation, lasting about ten minutes a session. Still tired and recovering from the effects of chemotherapy, Steven dreaded getting up some mornings. “I was pissed,” he says of the early morning appointments, “I like to sleep in.” Regina persisted and made sure that her son did not miss one day. “There were days when he said, ‘I don’t want to do this, I’m not going,’” remembers Regina.

Though radiation treatments were not as intense as chemo, they were no walk in the park either. The waiting room was always crowded and the environment was completely different from the calm rooms at the Cancer Center. Steven became exhausted, was nauseous, and got severe sore throats. Hearing her son’s name called to go into his radiation treatment broke Regina’s heart each time. One day, she walked out of the waiting room while Steven was in getting his treatment, and broke down. “I just allowed myself to cry,” she says. At that moment, Sharon, the nurse practitioner from the Cancer Center, walked out of the hospital and put her arms around Regina, hugging her tight. “No words, just a hug,” recalls Regina. “and I needed that more than she ever knew.” When hearing of Regina’s words of praise, Sharon says modestly, “That’s just what we do here.”

As the weeks passed, Steven regained some of his strength. By the time the treatments were winding down, he was able to do various things he had missed out on during the fall and winter. “I went out more with my friends, playing whiffle ball in the yard or just

hanging out,” he remembers. He endured his last radiation treatment on April 18th, and began looking ahead to the future.

As if the extraordinary care they gave to Steven was not enough, a few weeks into his recovery the Cancer Center orchestrated an unforgettable day for him. They hooked him up with John, a volunteer from the Marty Lyons Foundation, an organization begun by the former NFL Jet, that works to fulfill the wishes of children with cancer and other diseases. When asked what he would want, Steven decided that it would be nice for his family to have a big TV for the new room that had just been added on to their house.

The TV was delivered and installed, along with a theater system and Playstation. As excited as Steven was to have these, he was completely blown away by the surprise that the foundation gave him a week later. His mom answered the door one day and began walking towards him with Kenny Schroy, a former Jets player, by her side. “He was a really cool guy,” says Steven, who sat with him and listened to the athlete’s personal football stories about his time in the NFL. The doorbell rang again and Marty Lyons himself walked in. It was almost too much to process. Steven hung out with the former football players and talked about sports and other things. “It was really cool,” remembers Steven. “It made all the bad stuff a little better.”

With finals over, the summer officially began for Steven. It was a summer that he will never forget, mostly because he was able to just be a normal teenager. With his energy quickly returning, Steven hung out with his friends and did all the things he had enjoyed in the past, like playing video games and basketball. “That’s what I missed most when I was sick,” he says, “doing the little things.” The difference for him was that everyone had cars. “The big thing was driving around and just hanging out with the guys,” he says. He fell back into a comfortable rhythm with his friends. “Every one of my friends was really good to me,” he recounts. “We went right back to joking around and busting each other’s chops —everything went back to normal.” Though the port was still in his chest and he had to go for blood tests once every two weeks in addition to having chest Xrays and CT scans, that was small stuff for Steven now that he could run around and be himself.

Having done enough work while he was sick to keep up with the curriculum, Steven was allowed to stay with his classmates for senior year. When I ask him about that last year of high school, he smiles reflectively and says, “Ohhhhhh...senior year.” Although he could not play basketball due to his muscle loss and continued lack of stamina, he enjoyed all the weekend parties and cherished having normalcy in his life again. He joined his senior class on their trip to Disney World and didn’t miss a thing that year. The day he graduated is one that his parents will never forget. “When he came down the stairs that day with his cap and gown on,” says Regina, “I just lost it.” When he actually accepted his diploma, his parents could barely contain themselves. “It was one of the happiest moments of my life to see him walk on that stage and get that diploma,” remembers Regina.

With his terrible illness fading more each day, Steven was ready to embark on the next phase of his life. In the fall of 2007, he began his first semester at Sacred Heart University in Connecticut. Regina’s emotions overwhelmed her. “I was thrilled that he wanted to go away but I was terrified,” she says. “I had been sleeping in a recliner chair, watching him breathe every single night since his diagnosis.” When they had to leave his dorm room after helping him settle in, Regina felt helpless. “I didn’t know if I would be able to leave,” she remembers. Steven hugged his mother and told her, “Don’t worry, Mom, it’s gonna be okay — I’ll be okay.” She cried the whole way home.

When the Granges arrived back home, they found a letter that Steven had hidden for them before he left. In it, he thanked his parents for everything they had done for him. “It was the most beautiful letter,” says Regina.



Kenny Schroy & Marty Lyons during their visit with Steven.

Steven’s parents also wanted to do something special for their son, who had been through so much. As his 17th birthday approached, his parents bought him a new car, hiding it in Regina’s grandfather’s driveway. On the morning of May 11th, they drove the Jeep onto the driveway, where Regina’s parents and Tommy’s mother waited. Steven, who was still feeling very tired, was summoned outside by his parents. When he opened the door and walked outside, he was shocked by what he saw. “That was a great moment,” says Steven, smiling. “We had discussed a car, but I had no idea.”

By June, Steven felt well enough to go back to school to take his finals. “I was very nervous to see everyone,” he remembers. “I wondered what it would be like and if they would treat me differently.” A friend of his picked him up the morning of his first final and drove him to school. Though uneasy, Steven enjoyed the freedom of driving with a friend. “That was cool because I’d never driven with my friends before,” he says. As soon as he entered the school, Steven got a warm welcome from all his classmates. “Everyone was high-fiving me,” he says, “and they kept talking to me, saying they missed me — those five days of finals were pretty crazy.” Though he still felt self-conscious because he was wearing a baseball hat, something that was not allowed in school and made him stand out, he was glad to be there. “I did miss them,” he says, “and it felt good to be back at school with everyone.”





The Grange family at Alexandra's Sweet Sixteen – June 2008

College was fun for Steven, but after his first year away, he made a decision: "I realized that I missed home and just wanted to be back there with everyone," he says. As much as his parents missed him, they were worried that he would regret his decision and urged him to give it another year. He was adamant. "I said that my family means more to me than going to parties every night," he remembers, "I knew that if I left college, I would miss out on a lot, but if I went home, I would be with my family." He returned to Long Island and enrolled in Hofstra, where he would continue his studies.

Having had his port removed the past December, Steven felt like he had a new lease on life. "Everything was back to normal," he says of that time. "Except your attitude about life," interrupts his mom, laughing. "Before I had gotten sick, I was much more serious about things," he explains. "He liked to have a good time but was more regimented about things," Regina adds. "But after I got sick," he continues, "if I didn't want to do something, I didn't do it — I just wanted to have fun." His outlook is one to be admired. "I'm ready to start every day fresh and not take the little things for granted," he says, "I'm much more laid back and it takes a lot to get me really angry."

Though Regina and her son can jokingly tease one another, the underlying fear of the cancer returning lurks in the corners of their lives. "Every time he gets sick," says Regina, "I can't help but think, please God, don't let it be the cancer." Last January, Steven discovered a lump under his arm. Not wanting to worry his mom, he shared his discovery only with his father, who confided in his wife. As Regina, with her sister, boarded a plane to Florida to be at the bedside of their dad, who had just suffered a heart attack, she was sick to her stomach. As she flew to Florida, Steven & Tommy were on their way to Dr. Weinblatt's office to have the lump checked out. "It was the longest plane ride of my life and waiting to hear the results of the exam was excruciating," remembers Regina. Thankfully, all was okay and the lump was nothing of concern. For Regina, the impact of that

day remains part of her life. "I will never get over that feeling of panic every time Steven is not feeling well," she admits.

Though Regina and Tommy carried their son through his darkest hour, they cannot help but acknowledge the people who were so instrumental in his recovery. Their praise for the staff at the Cancer Center is effusive. "Every doctor, every nurse, the girls at the front desk — they were such an amazing group of people," she says. "We idolize politicians, sports figures, actors," Tommy adds, "but Dr. Weinblatt and his team are responsible for my son being on this earth today." They are also quick to applaud their family and friends, who stood by their sides throughout it all.

It is Steven, who has been in remission for three years now, who receives the highest accolades from the Granges. They continue to be inspired every day by his courage. Breathing a little easier as each year passes without a recurrence of the lymphoma, they try to focus on all the good things. For Tommy, his son is a constant companion. Though he loves shooting baskets, having football catches, and watching Jets games with him, what he enjoys most is just talking to Steven about life. "He is wise beyond his years," his dad boasts, "and he is going to make something great of himself some day — I will be a part of that." His sister, Alex, who remains close to Steven, has written college admissions essays about her brother's bravery. And Regina can barely get the words out to express the enormous respect and love she has for her beautiful boy. "I have never been more proud of anyone in my whole life," she chokes out as her eyes fill. "I know he can accomplish anything — he is my hero." As our interview concludes and I glance across the table at this handsome, well-spoken young man and his devoted family, I am in awe of how seamlessly his story has been woven into their lives, sealed into history, dotting the present and propelling him into a future bright with promise. |