



Beaumont School's Alique Topalian, cancer survivor, grateful for The Gathering Place

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Marc Golub/Special
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Alique Topalian

Alique Topalian, a junior at Beaumont School in Cleveland Heights, is a cancer survivor, but she doesn't remember much about her battle with it.

She was only 4 when she was diagnosed with acute myeloid leukemia, a cancer that starts inside bone marrow.

But Alique, 16, knows it was an intense experience for her family, and The Gathering Place assisted her family a lot during that time.

"They helped my mom find one of the top AML pediatric specialists in the country," she said. "He was in Seattle and communicated with and helped my doctors at Rainbow Babies & Children's Hospital."

AML is very rare in children, and Alique's prognosis was not favorable. Doctors thought she would need a bone marrow transplant to survive, and a match could not be found.

But after nine months of chemotherapy, Alique was able to go into remission, and she has been cancer-free ever since, she said.

Now Alique, of Beachwood, wants to give back. She and her mother, Michele Seyranian, will participate in the 10th annual Race for the Place, a benefit for The Gathering Place.

The race starts at 9:15 a.m. Sunday, on National Cancer Survivors Day, at Beachwood Place, 26300 Cedar Road.

Alique will walk in the 5K race, while Seyranian will also take part in the 5K event with a team of colleagues from KeyBank, where she works.

"God gave (Alique) a second chance, and we need to make good on that, and she is," Seyranian said.

'Wonderful place to go'

Seyranian said she became involved with The Gathering Place, a nonprofit, community-based cancer support center, while Alique was ill.

She has served on its board of directors for 10 years.

"The Gathering Place is a wonderful place to go," Seyranian said. "They help people through some of the darkest days of their lives.

"Cancer doesn't have to be a death sentence. You meet people there who have gone through the same type of treatment, and it helps you realize that people do survive and thrive afterward."

Alique said even though she is in good health, she is blind in her right eye, as a result of an infection that spread while she was hospitalized during her chemotherapy treatments.

The vision in her left eye is fine, she said, and although she lacks depth perception, she can drive.

Alique also has cognitive learning disabilities caused by the chemotherapy, which make processing math and science difficult for her.

"She's a great kid and has to work really hard (in school)," Seyranian said. "She's really determined and dedicated, and I think her cancer helped her to be that way, not to give up and to work hard.

"She has a huge heart and is very compassionate toward people."

She speaks to educate

Alique, the youngest of six children, said she speaks out about her cancer as a way to educate and support others. She has spoken at a teachers' workshop at The Gathering Place, representing someone who had cancer and returned to school.

"I spoke about how to talk to a child when a family member has cancer, how to talk to a class when a student has cancer and how to help students return to school when they're out for cancer treatment," she said.

Ten years ago, Alique, who is Armenian, and her family started a nonprofit organization called the Armenian Bone Marrow Donor Registry. She said she travels to Los Angeles, where the registry is headquartered, to speak every year.

Alique also has spoken on Capitol Hill in Washington to gain support for cancer research and was invited by the

American Cancer Society to lobby for dollars for pediatric cancer research. She also speaks to classes at Beaumont on the topic and has been interviewed on the radio.

When she was in fifth grade, Alique was named Leukemia & Lymphoma Society Girl of the Year.

Alique is a volunteer at Montefiore, a Jewish nursing home in Beachwood, where she visits residents and "helps brighten their day," her mother said.

Her favorite subject in school is English, and she enjoys community theater. She was chosen for the Baldwin-Wallace College Leadership & Public Policy Institute this school year and was recently elected into peer ministry at Beaumont.

Alique's career goal is to be a child psychologist. She also wants to be a lobbyist for cancer research.

"I want to get a Ph.D. in child psychology," she said. "I also want to keep speaking, as I do now.

"I just want to help as many people as I possibly can."

The Gathering Place has campuses at 23300 Commerce Park Road, Beachwood, and in Westlake. Call (216) 595-9546 or visit **touchedbycancer.org**.

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