

# Feature

## Dealing with a rare form of cancer

Jimi Yurkonis has battled adenoid cystic carcinoma for almost 12 years

By Jessica White

### Trend

After experiencing a sinus infection around the time of his ninth birthday, Jimi Yurkonis received an X-ray of his sinuses. If it wasn't for the fact that the person examining his x-rays was an expert in orbital readings and noticed an irregularity that most would have overlooked, Jimi, a Mount Laurel native, might not be alive today.

The irregularity led doctors to perform a CAT scan on Jimi, and a tumor was discovered. However, everyone initially reassured Jimi and his mother, Candy, that the growth was most likely a benign cyst.

The only other thing it could possibly be was adenoid cystic carcinoma, they said, and doctors rarely saw a person with that disease, if ever. And, most people diagnosed with adenoid cystic carcinoma were adults – few cases of the rare cancer existed in children.

However, further testing confirmed the worst: Jimi did indeed have adenoid cystic carcinoma.

The cancer, which most often develops in the salivary glands of the head and neck, is characterized as slow moving, but aggressive and difficult to eradicate. Tumors often re-emerge years after removal. There is neither a cause nor a cure for this form of cancer, and the survival rate in patients 15 years after diagnosis is a mere 40 percent. Now 20, Jimi has been dealing with the illness for almost 12 years.

Compounding Jimi's struggles was the fact that, shortly after his diagnosis, his father left the family, leaving Candy to deal with Jimi's illness alone.

Since his initial diagnosis, Jimi has undergone multiple surgeries and radiation therapy to remove tumors and curb the spread of his cancer, with the most recent occurring in mid May. Jimi's eye is still sewn shut from that surgery, inhibiting his sight.

"I have good days and bad days," Jimi said. "It's been tough."

Jimi's cancer is so rare that doctors from across the world routinely pay him visits and watch his case closely, studying how his can-

cy. The procedure required doctors to reconstruct Jimi's spine using titanium and plastic, and he had to learn how to walk again.

Many times, Jimi was told that he would not survive much longer. But, he tries not to focus on such negative thoughts and stays as positive as possible.

"I've always believed, when it comes to cancer and disease, it's how you react when you have it," Jimi said. "I believe that attitude matters."

Candy herself is ill, depending upon a nebulizer daily, and must both take care of Jimi and her sister, Debbie, who was confined to a wheelchair after a car accident. Her only assistance comes from her 77-year-old mother.

Money is hard to come by for the Yurkonis family. Candy spends many days traveling back and forth to hospitals all over the tri-state area (and beyond), and the costs associated with this are expensive.

"We're just hurting so bad right now," she said.

And, the house the family has owned for 23 years is falling apart. Many of the home's doors are broken, and the one's that haven't fallen off get stuck when closed. Candy's dream is to have the house remodeled, with special attention paid to Jimi's room, since he spends so much time there recovering from surgeries.

"I would love for Jimi's room, at least, to be a room of serenity," she said.

A fund has been created to help the Yurkonis family defray the costs associated with Jimi's illness. Donations to the Jimi Yurkonis fund can be sent to the Sterling Bank branch on Route 38 and Ark Road in Mount Laurel. Checks must be made out to the Jimi Yurkonis Fund.

