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Hialeah teen named 2012 Leukemia and Lymphoma Society Southern Florida Chapter's Boy of the Year - Four years after being diagnosed with lymphoma, a Hialeah teen is honored for his work to help raise awareness and fund research to find cures for blood cancers.

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When doctors at Joe DiMaggio Children's Hospital in Broward told CJ George he had cancer, the Hialeah boy didn't understand.

He had only been suffering from back pain.

"I was only 9, I didn't know exactly what I was going through," said CJ, now 13.

His mother remembers how the news affected him

"When he was told he could no longer play sports, he had a total meltdown," said Dawn George.. "He didn't care about cancer; he cared about how his life was going to change."

CJ is now in remission after undergoing two years of treatment for Stage 3 Acute Lymphoblastic Lymphoma. After seeing children his own age pass away, CJ wanted to help raise awareness and fund research to find cures for blood cancers. This year, CJ was named the 2012 Leukemia and Lymphoma Society Southern Florida Chapter's Boy of the Year.

His sponsor — and the society's Man of the Year — is Matthew Sacco, president of communications and public affairs for Sunrise Sports and Entertainment, the Florida Panther's Hockey Club and the BankAtlantic Center .

Each year, LLS names a boy and girl of the year with either leukemia or lymphoma blood cancers. LLS also names a Man and Woman of the Year, as part of a 10-week national campaign to raise funding for critical research. Each candidate raises money on their boy or girl's behalf, and each dollar raised counts as a vote. Sacco won after raising more than \$100,000. Together, the 13 candidates raised \$378,000.

"It was a record-breaking year for us," Rhonda Siegel, Campaign Manager for LLS Southern Florida Chapter, said. "It was the most money ever raised."

Sacco said he jumped at the chance to get involved and campaign after meeting CJ two years ago at LLS' Light the Night Walk's corporate reception, an event aimed to inspire corporate sponsors to get involved. CJ was the honoree that night and was scheduled to speak, after he had just come back from one of his treatments.

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"He was really quiet that night and didn't look very well," Sacco said. "He had treatment early that day and threw up on the car ride there and then had to give a speech to everybody."

Sacco said when CJ finally went up to speak, his boss was hesitant to go after him.

"It was an incredible speech. He is really one of the best speakers I've ever heard. I tell people he's going to be president one day. My boss asked me, 'Am I really supposed to go up after this kid,'" Sacco said. "We were very inspired by his story, his charisma . . . he's an infectious kid to be around and it's impossible not to fall in love with him."

Sacco's company gave CJ season tickets to the Florida Panthers games when they learned he was a fan, and Sacco and CJ still hang out regularly.

"I was just jet skiing with him last weekend," Sacco said.

Although CJ is now a vibrant spokesperson, his mother said his years battling cancer were a constant struggle for her son, who took pride in playing sports.

"He was suffering from back pain for quite a while, but we had no inkling that it would be so serious," George said after learning the back pain was caused by multiple tumors surrounding CJ's spine. "When they transferred him by ambulance to the ER, we were in a state of panic. I remember staring at the doctor's tag that said 'oncologist' and not wanting to believe it."

CJ said the hardest part was missing out on his flag football season.

"The hardest part was not playing sports," said CJ, who is homeschooled. "You feel different from everybody else."

Toward the end of his treatment, he started reading internet articles and books about different sports he wanted to try when he got better.

"He said he was going to look at it as if he was an athlete on the injured list and this was his rebuilding season," George said. "He definitely went through a wide range of emotions. When a little girl passed away that was the same age as him, he realized she would never be able to share her story."

Since that realization, CJ has been speaking at many cancer awareness events and still has play dates with cancer patients at the same hospital he was treated at. He was also recently named the 2012 National Youth Ambassador for Hyundai's Hope on Wheels nonprofit pediatric cancer organization, where he will tour the country and make speeches to raise awareness.

"I didn't want to just go through treatment and just turn my back on the kids still going through it," CJ said. "I wanted to give back to them, share my story and make them feel better. It is hard because a lot of kids don't make it and pass away and it makes me want to raise money to find a cure."

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