

Abigail Perez

5 Years Old

DIAGNOSIS:

Abigail was found to suffer from acute myeloid leukemia in 2007.

ABIGAIL'S STORY:

Little Abigail had always been the picture of health, but one day during a family vacation, one of her eyes began to bulge. Concerned, her parents, Marcelle and Billy, took her for an examination at their local hospital. On July 16, 2007, the family learned Abigail suffered from acute myeloid leukemia. Doctors gave her a 50 percent chance of survival.

Hurricane Katrina had wreaked havoc on the hospital in their hometown. Garbage collected in the hallways. No one came to remove the food trays from Abigail's room, and ants moved in. "We went into survival mode," Marcelle said. Abigail's parents wanted a research hospital to provide cutting-edge treatment for their daughter. Their search led them to St. Jude Children's Research Hospital. The local doctor provided the referral, and St. Jude took care of travel arrangements.

AT ST. JUDE:

A nurse greeted the family. "Are you Abigail?" she said. "We've been waiting for you." Abigail was instantly put at ease and loved the hospital. When they got into their room at Grizzlies House, Marcelle told her husband, "I think she's going to make it."

The battle against cancer affects the entire family. One day, Marcelle broke down on the elevator, and it was a St. Jude maintenance man who provided words of comfort. "There's no crying today, miss," he said. "We do miracles here, so you just dry up those tears." It was exactly what she needed to hear. These small, random acts of kindness accentuate the treatment at St. Jude and make the difference between this and other hospitals – at least for the Perez family. "No other hospital in the world compares," said Marcelle. "Everyone from Dr. Ribeiro to the maintenance staff is on a mission."

St. Jude is the only pediatric cancer research center where families never pay for treatment not covered by insurance, and families without insurance are never asked to pay. "Insurance doesn't matter here," said Marcelle. "If she needs a test, she gets the test." It's a good thing too. Abigail's treatment costs a minimum of \$20,000 per month; complications increase the cost. "I really believe the treatment costs could have bankrupted us," said Marcelle, "but what choice did we have? Thank God there is St. Jude where parents do not have to choose between the life of their child and the huge financial burdens of skyrocketing healthcare costs."

Marcelle says they are "evangelical about St. Jude" and calls it the "Disney World of hospitals." She appreciates so many things about the hospital, from their lodging at Target House, where every need is anticipated, to the hospital's school program.

Abigail now tests negative for leukemic cells. She's done with chemotherapy and returns to the hospital every four months for follow-up. She's an active girl who loves swimming, riding her bike and watching shows like *Dora the Explorer* and *Mickey Mouse Clubhouse*.

