
[BHS Swim Team & Forward Foundation's "Swim for a Cause" Event: A swimmer shares his story](#)

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When Forward Foundation teamed up with the Bemidji High School Swim Team for this year's "Swim for a Cause" fundraiser, we had no idea that we'd hit so close to home. It was in an email sent by a swim team member's grandmother that we learned one of the swimmers helping to raise money for the event was also a survivor of childhood cancer.

Tyler Hemp, now a 17-year-old preparing for his senior year of high school, is swimming not only in support of his team but an organization dedicated to helping kids and their families who've gone through what he has.

Tyler Hemp competes in the 200 yard freestyle. Monte Draper | [Bemidji Pioneer](#)

In September 2000, Tyler was diagnosed with acute lymphocytic leukemia (ALL). He was 4 years old. Tyler's mother, Erica (Hemp) Daman, had suspected something was wrong with her child. When Erica's pediatrician told her that Tyler was most likely just run down from daycare, she wasn't convinced and sought a second opinion. This second pediatrician, Dr. Erickson, gave Tyler the blood test. His white blood cell counts were indeed above normal. Thinking it was probably nothing more than a case of the flu, Dr. Erickson scheduled a follow up test the next week. Tyler's counts were higher. But still not convinced this was reason for alarm, they watched and waited one more week before testing again. When the lab got those results back, Erica received a call: "You need to come in now, with Tyler."

That day, their lives changed drastically. Tyler endured drilling into his hip bone for marrow and punctures into his spine for samples and chemo injections. An IV port was embedded in his chest to administer treatment. Shots and pills were now part of their daily routine. "He was really good about it," Erica remembers. "But it was hard – both emotionally and financially."

Erica, who was at the time raising Tyler on her own, had to quit her job. For 42 months, the family and often Erica's mother, Danette Hemp, traveled back and forth from Bemidji to Fargo to see Tyler's oncologist and for chemotherapy. Hotels, gas, food, time away from work – it all added up. But this was nothing compared to the medical bills. "When I opened the first bill from the hospital, I couldn't believe it," Erica recalled. After Tyler's induction hospital stay, the portion of the balance *not* covered by her insurance came out to \$75,000. Many people know that illness is expensive but have only a vague idea of the costs associated with serious medical conditions. Erica was lucky and

had support from her family. "People lose their houses," she noted. "But if you had to pick losing your house or your child, you'd pick losing your house every time."

Though the time was trying, Tyler and Erica made it a point to focus on the good stuff. "We couldn't have asked for better staff or doctors," says Erica. This included CRNA Ray Meier who administered the bone marrow biopsies and lumbar punctures. When Tyler went downstairs to see Ray, who would give him his "sleepy medicine," he would dress up in costumes like Spiderman or Tarzan and bring Ray red (his favorite) Starbursts. One of the nurses' daughters even came up to Tyler's wing before prom so he and Erica could see her dress. "They became our friends."

When Tyler thinks back, these are the things he remembers. "Mostly," he told me, "I remember having fun." Tyler and Erica always made the most of their situation. Swimming in the hotel was one way. In addition to swimming the night before his treatments, the hospital would sometimes issue day passes, free time that Tyler would often spend in the pool.

Today, Tyler is healthy and still swimming. "He's always been good in the water," his mother recalled. When he was 8 years old, someone noticed and suggested he swim competitively in the BASS Swim Club. He's been swimming ever since and has been on the BHS team since the 8th grade. Now their surrogate family of doctors and nurses has been replaced with friends like the ones on Tyler's swim team. "We all get along really well and some of us are pretty close," he says, "like brothers."

Friday, August 9, 2013 this team of swimmers will cross Lake Bemidji, swimming 5 miles from the Bemidji Town & Country Club to the Green Mill raising money for both their team and Forward Foundation, whose mission is to transform the lives of children experiencing a life-threatening health crisis and their families by providing financial assistance to eliminate financial obstacles.

"I don't think he would be the same kid he is today without this experience," says Erica. "Not every family is so lucky. I remind him that he is lucky just to be here and to take advantage of that every day."

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