Learning to Live with Crohn’s Disease

By Amy Stutzman
Contributing Writer

Their stories are different, but they share a common thread. Sophomore Shannon Terranova and Senior Bill Harner must endure the abdominal cramps, nausea, fatigue and constant medical appointments associated with Crohn’s disease.

According to the Crohn’s and Colitis Foundation of America (CCFA), Crohn’s disease is a chronic inflammation of the gastrointestinal tract. The disease occurs when white blood cells produce substances that damage the tissue of the intestinal wall, leading to chronic inflammation.

Terranova’s battle with Crohn’s disease began while living in South America. One day, she had stomach cramps so severe she couldn’t move. In 1991 after almost a year of medical appointments, doctors diagnosed her with Crohn’s disease.

Harner’s struggle with the disease started when he began having abdominal pain. Doctors discovered he had Crohn’s disease after an emergency surgery in December 2001.

Crohn’s disease is difficult to diagnose because its symptoms imitate those of other health problems. According to the National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases (NIDDK), the most common symptoms of Crohn’s disease are pain in the lower right side of the abdomen and diarrhea. Other symptoms include fever, nausea and a loss of appetite.

Doctors had a challenging time diagnosing both Harner and Terranova. After eight hours of testing, doctors thought an infection in Harner’s abdomen caused his severe abdominal pain. They decided to perform surgery to drain the infection, but instead removed a portion of Harner’s small intestine and diagnosed him with Crohn’s disease.

Doctors thought a parasite caused Terranova’s severe abdominal pain, nausea, fatigue and diarrhea. When she moved back to the U.S., they did further testing and diagnosed her with Crohn’s disease.

After their diagnoses, many people with Crohn’s disease must adapt to significant changes in their life. Many people with the disease must alter their diet, avoiding foods that are spicy or high in fiber, since they can aggravate symptoms.

Terranova can identify. She said the “biggest thing [I had to get used to after being diagnosed] was the diet change. I was not able to eat most of the things I loved and ate a lot of.”

According to Terranova, the list of her forbidden foods includes “all dairy products, beans, onions, fruits except berries, melons and grapes, most vegetables and spicy foods.”

“I have to be careful about my intake of rich and fatty foods,” said Harner. He had to give up broccoli, one of his favorite foods, since he also can’t eat any dairy products or green vegetables.

There is currently no cure for Crohn’s disease, although many treatment options exist. Many people take certain medications, which help control Crohn’s disease by reducing inflammation in the digestive system. Such medications include steroids and drugs that suppress the immune system. Some must also take nutritional supplements because their body can’t absorb all of the nutrients needed to function properly.

Surgery that involves removing the diseased parts of the intestine is also a treatment option. According to the CCFA, doctors must perform surgery if the symptoms of Crohn’s disease can no longer be controlled by medication.

Surgery is not a cure and has risks. According to the NIDDK, the inflammation will probably return to the area where doctors performed surgery. In severe cases, doctors must remove the entire large intestine.

Surgery is not an option for Terranova because the disease is too widespread. For Harner, doctors performed surgery, not knowing at the time that he had the disease. While doing exploratory surgery, doctors discovered that much of Harner’s small intestine was damaged.

“When I woke up, I was told that 1.5 feet of my small intestine had been removed because it was perforated and had caused an infection to within an hour of me going into septic shock when surgery was started. They told me the perforations were caused by Crohn’s,” said Harner.

Terranova and Harner struggle daily with the disease. Terranova said one of the biggest struggles she encounters every day is “having to look like I’m not in pain in the middle of class when I am.” She said she has abdominal cramps one or two times a day. Some can last for hours and be “horrifyingly painful.”

Said Harner, “It’s not every day but I’ve been in considerable pain.”

Harner said being diagnosed with Crohn’s disease has given him a new perspective on life.

“There is a lot more to life than I used to think,” he said. “I just try to enjoy things and be passionate about what I enjoy,” he said.

Said Terranova, “You have to thank God for every day of your life and live it as happily … as you can. I may be having a bad day, but in the end I know everything is going to be all right.”

On The Sidewalk:

“Do you have any crazy adventures planned for Christmas break?”

“Nope, but the day after Thanksgiving we’re butchering pigs.”

-Daniel Bluest, sophomore

“Unfortunately, no.”

-Jiyun Hong, CTP graduate student

“I’m hitting up the slopes in Colorado.”

-Eric Lante, senior

“Sleeping. Is that crazy?”

-Kelly Smoker, sophomore

“Um, I might go to Maryland.”

-Jen “Apple-Jack” Fawley, sophomore

-Foot In Mouth

“Don’t you normally need to pull your pants down to do that?”

-Scott Just

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