

## Friends help Klein High teen cope with cancer

*Girl hopes to return to class this February*

By BRANDON MOELLER



DAVID HOPPER: FOR THE CHRONICLE  
*Klein High School junior Maria "Fabi" Pacifico, holding a white balloon and wearing a solid purple scarf, smiles as about 30 of her high school friends walk in support of her battle with cancer during the Light the Night Walk, at Central Park in Market Street earlier this month.*

Not long after school let out for the summer, Klein High School student Maria "Fabi" Pacifico was diagnosed with pneumonia by local doctors.

A few weeks later, the 17-year-old traveled to her hometown of Weston in Florida to visit friends and family, but her health continued to worsen during the month long visit.

On Aug. 12, two days before her scheduled return home to prepare for her junior year, Pacifico went to a Miami-area emergency room complaining of shortness of breath. There, doctors found liquid in her lungs and around her heart and on Aug. 15 she was diagnosed with Hodgkin's lymphoma, a form of cancer that attacks the lymph nodes in the neck and chest.

"I was sick practically all summer," Pacifico said. "It turns out it really wasn't pneumonia, it was the cancer giving me a clue it was starting. The X-rays looked just like pneumonia, the doctors said. But it never went away."

The news shocked Pacifico, an otherwise healthy and vibrant teenager, but it didn't devastate her. It did keep her in Florida a little longer than she had expected, but the extended stay was welcome.

"A huge part of my recovery was the support I had from my sister, my brother-in-law and his family and friends and my boyfriend while I was there," Pacifico said. "I don't know if it would have been as easy as it was without them. They even made cutting my hair off, which I thought would be the worst part, a fun experience."

Her treatment continued in Florida until a few weeks ago when she returned to continue it at Texas Children's Hospital.

But before her first Houston chemotherapy appointment, she met up with about 30 of her closest Klein High School classmates and wearing purple bandanas and walking hand in hand through the night at an event in The Woodlands raised more than \$2,000 for lymphoma research.

"It meant the world to me," Pacifico said. "I was so appreciative because I didn't expect something that big."

Neither did her friend, 16-year-old Sofia Adalis, who soon after hearing about her close friend's diagnosis, began organizing the walking team for the Texas Gulf Coast Chapter of the Leukemia and Lymphoma Society's Light the Night event at Market Street in The Woodlands.

As a team captain, Adalis designed "Fighting for Fabi" T-shirts and arranged for purple bandanas for everyone to wear. For the past three years, Adalis has volunteered with her mother at the Light the Night event.

"I found out about the Leukemia and Lymphoma Society through the Champions chapter of National Charity League, which I joined in the seventh grade because it was a mother-daughter organization, and I wanted to volunteer in the community," Adalis said. "I was volunteering to get hours, but I never realized how important it was until my friend got lymphoma."

Not only was Adalis surprised by the community's response to Pacifico's story, her fundraising team raised four times its \$500 goal. Adalis said her friend has been an inspiration to her and her fellow classmates.

"She's always positive," Adalis said. "She's always looking up and seeing the good things in people. She's always nice to everyone. She wants to be a pediatric oncologist, because of what she's going through and she wants to help others."

Pacifico said that her doctors have been surprised by her quick recovery, labeling her a "fast responder." What usually requires six sessions of chemotherapy is expected to only require four in her case. She began her last round this week.

"I don't see it as something negative in my life," Pacifico said. "I've benefited from it - it has helped me see life in a different way. After all, I am getting cured ... I see it as something that is opening my eyes to how important life is. And I want to tell my story. A lot of other kids are going through this."

"To me, it was a lot of help to know about others my age who are going through this."

Pacifico said her doctors think she should be able to return to classes at Klein High School in February.