

Brody's Story by Monica Robbins

It was late April 2005 when Brody, our sweet, loving Great Pyrenees snuggled over to Daddy and yawned. It was one of those wide mouthed yawns that we used to laugh about because he looked like a shark with all of his teeth showing.

We purchased Brody at eight weeks from a backyard breeder in Massillon on September 17, 2004. Hindsight is 20/20 and looking back we should have known better. The man had several different types of breeds on his property. Kennelled outside were Mastiffs, White Shepherds, Boxers and a recently acquired male and female Great Pyrenees. Brody was supposedly from their second litter. He was also the runt, a fact that was not shared with us until later.

I had just lost my Dad and my 13-year-old Samoyed a few months earlier. I wasn't thinking clearly and desperately wanted a new dog, so we settled on this breeder even though something told me it wasn't a good idea.

He cost \$500, which is actually quite a bargain for a Pyr. The day we picked him up the breeder handed all nine pounds of him to me. I should have known then considering all of his siblings were at least double his size, but to us our new puppy was still huge. My husband looked at me and said, "I think we need a bigger house." We laughed thinking of the scene in the movie "Jaws" when the Chief Brody character sees the shark for the first time and says, "We're gonna need a bigger boat." So we named him Brody.

Health problems started soon after we got him home. The smartest thing I did however was purchasing Pet Insurance. I had no idea how valuable it would later become. In his first year of life, Brody amassed a vet record half an inch thick. Thanks to the Pet Insurance I never hesitated taking him in if something was wrong.

That April morning yawn would change our lives. On the upper left palate of his mouth Brody had a five-centimeter growth that was fire red. Instantly I called the vet and got the dog into the car. I had a very bad feeling about this trip.

When the vet took a look he told us that it had to be removed and Brody would be required to spend the night. I

remember standing in the parking lot with his leash and breaking down. I couldn't shake the feeling of dread.

The next day and about \$600 later I picked him up and brought him home. His mouth was raw where they lasered away the mass and he'd lost his appetite. We couldn't even coax him with steak or chicken. Four days later on Saturday morning the phone rang. It was our vet calling to tell us that Brody's tumor was malignant and we needed to make an appointment with a Veterinary Oncologist. Monday morning we were in the waiting room with about a dozen other dog owners facing a cancer diagnosis.

I'm usually not an emotional person, but I fall to pieces when it comes to my animals. We don't have children so perhaps it's some parental instinct we have regarding our dogs. Regardless, I was a wreck in that waiting room. I assumed any dog that gets cancer dies from it. Fast.

The worst part was realizing that the other dogs in the waiting room were much older. My dog wasn't even two yet. I felt cheated, confused, scared, alone and above all, helpless.

When it was time for our consult with the Vet Oncologist I wasn't sure what to expect. The first thing he did was hand me a tissue and tells me that I didn't have to be tough around him. It was ok to cry. The people at the clinic saw people like us everyday. The people in the waiting room felt the pain of those who walked out in tears. Every one of us was there because we loved our pets that we were willing to find them the best healthcare available. In some cases, no matter the cost. I was willing to spend whatever it took to get Brody healthy. I had Pet Insurance, a credit card and a decent income. The biggest heartbreak wasn't the dogs with cancer; it was the people who couldn't afford the treatment.

Brody was diagnosed with an Oral High Grade Fibro sarcoma. There wasn't a whole lot of information about it on the Internet and what I did find wasn't promising. The tumor was growing so fast, without treatment my dog only had a few weeks to live. What was more frustrating is that he was the first Great Pyrenees ever seen at the cancer clinic. Pyrs are known to be at risk for Osteosarcoma but usually later in life. A young dog with oral Fibro sarcoma

was very rare, but we hoped his youth would work to his advantage.

The best treatment option for Fibro sarcoma is surgery. Usually the tumors appear on the limbs and amputation can save the animal's life. But Brody's tumor wasn't that easy. If we opted for surgery they would have needed to remove nearly a quarter of his head. Including his eye and a large portion of his jaw. Then, there was no guarantee they would be able to get the clean margins they needed to prevent the cancer from returning. They also didn't know how far up into his skull the tumor went or if it reached his brain.

The other risk of this type of cancer is that the cancer cells will enter the lungs which is a fatal diagnosis.

We decided that the surgery would destroy his quality of life. That didn't seem to be a fair choice being that they couldn't be sure to get all of the cancer. I refused to let the dog suffer. In fact, we decided that no matter what happens, we would not let him suffer a painful death.

Our next option was Radiation therapy. Eighteen days straight. Every morning I drove across town, about thirty miles, so Brody could get his radiation treatment. It usually took about ninety minutes. I sat in the waiting room with all the other cancer pet owners. We became our own support group. We cried at the losses and cheered the positive outcomes. We also supported those who were newly diagnosed. I met many people who drove up to three hours so their pet could receive cancer therapy. I was also extremely lucky to have a boss who was a dog lover. He didn't mind my coming in late because of Brody's treatments.

Usually after radiation Brody would be very tired. He would sleep the day away, but perk up at night. After the second week however, he stopped eating. The radiation was beginning to destroy the tumor tissue and his mouth was raw. They advised us to use an oral antiseptic to help him with the pain, but usually we couldn't even get his mouth open. He started spending time away from us. He wanted to be left alone in the basement. It was heartbreaking to see him in so much pain. We tried everything we could to get him to eat but to no avail. I pureed his food in the blender, gave him pure chicken or beef or chicken broth but

he wouldn't touch a thing. He was about 110 pounds when we started radiation in mid May. But the end of June he was down to 70 pounds.

After we finished our last treatment I was advised that the radiation would continue working, killing the cancer cells. What I didn't realize is that meant the dog would be in far more pain. I was walking him one day and suddenly he started screaming. It was a horrific sound. It didn't sound like a typical dog yelp; it was a scream that I'll never forget. He looked at me and I was helpless. There was nothing I could do. People started coming out of their homes when they heard the noise, probably thinking that I was beating him or something. When I tried to explain that he had an oral cancer, they looked at me as if I were crazy. It amazed me how many people did not believe dogs get cancer too.

The summer of 2005 was a difficult one but by late August Brody started eating normally again. Prior to that occasionally we got him to eat the pureed mix. We went back to the vet every three months for exams and chest x-rays and was elated each time the vet told us there was no sign of cancer.

When Brody was first diagnosed the vet was honest with us. Most dogs don't survive this type of cancer. In his career, he only had one dog survive three years. When your looking at weeks, three years sounds pretty good. We were grateful for every moment we had left.

The radiation treatment gave us almost an entire year of remission. Then in April of 2006 we looked in his mouth and our hearts broke. The tumor had returned, but this time there were two.

Our next option was chemotherapy. We began treatment immediately. The good thing about canine chemo is that they handle it much better than humans do. Brody didn't lose his hair or get sick from it. It did sap his energy, but chemo appointments were just once a week.

The first round of chemo bought us another month of remission, but then the cancer came back a third time and this time it was growing incredibly fast. We tried one more round of chemo, but at the end, it was clear that the High Grade Fibro sarcoma was going to win.

At that point we decided to stop all treatment and let Brody live out his days in peace. We spoiled him rotten feeding him whatever he wanted which was usually London broil. He also loved slushy drinks and we often treated him to Rita's Italian Ice. When he'd let us, we'd tried to sneak a peak into his mouth and were heartbroken by how fast the tumors were growing. They were the size of my fists and growing down his throat. Eventually his breathing became labored and we knew it was time. We shuddered at the thought of him suffocating from the tumors.

His personality also began to change. He became extremely protective of me and attacked four people who came near me. The vet believed the tumor was going into his brain.

On August 25th we took our three-year-old Great Pyrenees to the vet for the last time. That morning, he ran down into our creek and chased away the ducks and geese. It was incredibly frustrating knowing that our dog appeared healthy on the outside, but was dying from within.

We both held him while the vet tried to find a working vein. The chemo collapses the veins and it was extremely difficult to watch the dog get a needle in all four legs because the vet couldn't find one that would work.

However, at 12:15pm, I held his head in my hands, looked into his eyes and we told him how much we loved him as he went to sleep for the last time.

I felt an enormous sense of grief but also a weird sense of joy. I knew the dog was no longer in pain and in my heart I knew we did the right thing. The most important thing we had to remember was to put his needs before our own.

Brody's treatment cost us more than \$10,000. Bills were required to be paid at each vet visit. Receipts were sent to the Pet Insurance and then reimbursed. In the end the insurance covered almost 40%.

For those dealing with a fatal cancer diagnosis have faith. We both believed Brody's soul would find its way back to us. As I write this, our new Great Pyrenees, Griffin, whom we bought from a reputable breeder in June 2007 is drooling on my laptop and licking away my tears.