

Strokes Of Survival

Junior’s passion for art helps support the cause for cancer

by staff reporter
Syeda Gilani

Multi-colored ribbons hang from the walls as a sea of students in orange walk the halls. Amongst them junior Kiara Torres wears her bright orange painted shirt. She looks at all the people raising awareness for cancer, and thinks back to her own painful days in the hospital. A smile crosses her face as she proudly calls herself, “survivor.”

“I’m very casual about it,” Torres said. “When you’re battling such a big disease, you don’t know what to do anymore, and sometimes you don’t know who to talk to because you feel alone. I make many shirts and props to raise awareness, not just for me, but to let others who are currently fighting know that they are not alone.”

Keeping her own story in mind, Torres competes in several art competitions, such as VASE. She uses her artistic skills to support those who are currently fighting cancer by auctioning off her pieces for awareness raising organizations and talking to children who feel alone. Her goal is to be an art therapist and help all those who feel isolated achieve solace through art, as she once did.

“It’s a different environment when you’re surrounded by people who understand,” Torres said. “You can’t put a kid in a room full of kids who have never experienced what they’re going through. I can always get close to kids who have been through the same, you just click together.”

As a former cancer patient, Torres goes in for annual checkups, blood work and Echocardiograms. Her goal is not only to avoid being diagnosed again, but to raise awareness for those who are going through or have fought cancer.

“You see people with their hair and you see people outside and you feel it,” Torres said. “I couldn’t go outside and play or run because I bruise easily, and I couldn’t be out in the sun because it would harm my skin. I would just stay inside and draw.”

After visiting the pediatrician twice and being diagnosed with a common virus, Torres’ mother took her to The Miami Children’s Hospital Emergency Room.

“We were in the moving process when she first

got sick,” Torres’s mother Yanisbel Torres said. They said the virus would go away, but Kiara got worse.”

The doctors kept Torres under observation and ran several blood tests on. On May 21, 2010, at the age of 3, Torres was diagnosed with Acute Lymphoid Leukemia in her bone marrow.

“The moment the doctor came in to tell us, I blocked him, until the last sentence that he told me, ‘She has Leukemia,’” Mrs. Torres said. “That moment I came back, it felt like an out of the body experience. That moment, my life changed. My only child had cancer.”

Torres was immediately admitted for Intrathecal Chemotherapy. She underwent bone marrow aspiration with portacaths surgically placed twice. The procedural plan was for three years.

“Sometimes if I wear a dress or something you can see the marks,” Torres said. “My mom started taking precautions like not heating up plastic, and nothing with sodium nitrate, limitation on sugar and no soda. Even this day we have precautions to make sure it never comes back.”

With six months of therapy left, Torres’ cancer relapsed. The spinal test showed the cancerous cells spreading to the Central Nervous System. After being placed under another series of tests, Torres was moved to a more difficult procedure.

“I was almost five, going through various surgeries, implants and procedures,” Torres said. “I had to go through all the pain because they never sedated me with the spine ports and huge needles. They would have to hold me down like a ball so I wouldn’t scream out of pain.”

Once again, Torres had ports placed up and down her spinal cord and shoulders. She underwent stronger chemotherapy. She began to thin and lose her hair due to the brain radiation procedure.

“I was 24/7 at the hospital,” Torres said. “We were all stuck in hospital beds, eating garbage food or not eating at all because of all the chemotherapy. I tried to ignore my fears because you never know what will happen next.”

Mrs. Torres, who was 22 at the time, began spending days in the hospital. She had recently given birth to another daughter who was nearly three-months-old, and would often leave



The journey of junior Kiara Torres: From her first day at chemotherapy to her brain radiation procedure, despite her health issues, Torres never lost her passion for art. In fact, she dedicated the above two pieces, titled of surrealism and Tim Burton to art competitions and cancer societies.

her newborn with her grandma so she could personally watch over Torres during her tests and therapy.

“I did not understand why,” Mrs. Torres said. “I even questioned God, I asked him why Kiara? Why did she have to go through this again and with less chance of survival. But, at the same time, as I watched her become friends with people who didn’t make it, I would pray and ask him to protect my daughter.”

As time passed, Torres’ only wish was to go to public school and learn to read and write. She began to spend holidays in the hospital surrounded by her new family which consisted of nurses, patients and families of patients.

“I didn’t really have friends outside the hospital,” Torres said. “It felt terrible, it is terrible. Imagine your best friend lying on a bed all the time, unable to move, unable to do anything, losing their hair, thin, pale, it’s even hard to eat.”

When she reached the age, Torres’ mother tried to have Torres join a school. However,

photos courtesy of Kiara Torres

because of her inability to read or write, she was unable to pass the second grade.

“She had to put in extra work because being homebound was not enough quality teaching,” Mrs. Torres said. “Kiara would get sick and, at times, she would stay home for 21-45 days at a time. This journey was extremely nerve wrecking.”

Mrs. Torres kept her daughter inside to keep her from sustaining injuries and she began teaching her how to read and write. Torres attended public school and restarted the second grade. She was unable to go outside and play with other kids, so she concentrated on art. She worked hard to get her education on track, however her passion for art did not drop.

“I never showed her any type of weakness because we were going to fight this monster and we did,” Mrs. Torres said. “We have a special bond that I do not have with my other daughters. Kiara is a miracle, she beat cancer twice. She is my hero.”

I would describe myself. I see myself playing basketball in the future, and I don’t think I can ever let that go.”

Iqbal has been playing basketball since he was 9. He and his father, Iqbal Zia, began watching the games on TV, peeking his interest in playing.

“I liked watching the teamwork,” Iqbal said. “All the players cooperate and work together to get the ball from the opposing team. I lik the way they all run towards the basket synchronized, defending one another.”

At the age of 11, Iqbal was diagnosed with Type 2 diabetes and he and his family was told to get it under control.

“When I found out he has diabetes I was really scared,” his mother, Saima Iqbal, said.

“The doctor warned us to not feed him starchy or sugary food. I began to take precautions and made him exercise daily.”

After the death of both his grandfathers during January and March 2015, Iqbal suffered through panic attacks. According to his mother, Saima Iqbal, he would have heavy breathing and chest pains. Upon visiting the doctor, he was diagnosed with severe anxiety and depression.

“I was really scared,” Iqbal said. “I couldn’t think straight and I couldn’t stop crying. I was unable to do anything. I didn’t talk to anyone and I would just keep to myself.”

His mother worked to pull him out of isolation. She, herself, suffered from anxiety from her father’s death.

No Debate About It

Junior wheels past first impressions, challenges

by staff reporter **Johnny Nguyen**

Junior Sam Miller slowly enters the debate room. His opponent impatiently spins his pen, as the judge, just a few feet away, texts away on her phone. The two look up at the door, and their eyes suddenly grow wide. They weren’t expecting someone in a wheelchair.

“It doesn’t bug me if people judge me because I can still enjoy life,” Miller said. “I don’t let the condition get in the way of things I want to do. I think that I can be just as good as the next person.”

Miller has a genetic disorder known as neurofibromatosis 1 (NF1), which causes the presence and growth of tumors anywhere in the nervous system. These tumors can become huge, causing a wide range of health effects, but Sam Miller hasn’t let that get in the way of what he wants to do: learn how to debate.

“It’s really fun,” Miller said. “I’m making a lot of friends, [and] it’s something outside of school that I really enjoy doing. I love to learn new things.”

Sam learns from and competes with the debate team, despite the effects of NF1, which have caused him to use a wheelchair.

“I have a tumor that grows from the middle of my spine all the way down to my right knee,” Miller said. “So, I use my wheelchair to limit the amount of pain from the tumor being in my leg, my back and my hip.”

The condition has made it difficult for Miller to walk after a certain amount of time because of pain. However, he says that a limited range of motion is not his only problem. He has gone through studies, chemotherapy, and of course, surgery, in an attempt to get rid of the tumor.

“They tried to remove a portion of [the tumor], and it grew back,” Miller said. “They found it again at around 7-years-old. They tried chemotherapy for it, and it didn’t work. I was out of school a lot.”

That all changed when Miller finally came back to school from homebound this year.

“Pretty much from eighth grade through tenth grade, I was on homebound,” Miller said. “Now I’m back in school, a new school, and I’m doing pretty good. I decided to make some friends and socialize a little bit.”

It wasn’t just school that was new, though. Sam decided he wanted to join the debate team, not only to increase his knowledge of debate, but to help in his future and career aspirations of becoming a political

activist.

“I thought of debate as a way to learn how to communicate to where it would better me for the future,” Miller said. “The fact that I’m in a wheelchair doesn’t really bug me at all with what I can accomplish, because I know other people who have accomplished things just as well, in even worse conditions than I am.”

Along with learning many argumentative skills, he has also made friends while on the team.

“He’s a good person, and a good addition to the team. [His condition] isn’t an issue,” varsity debater Rachitha Jadala said. “He better understands the structure and he’s more strategic now.”

Miller himself has also noticed his own growth, citing his motivation and willingness to learn from his mistakes.

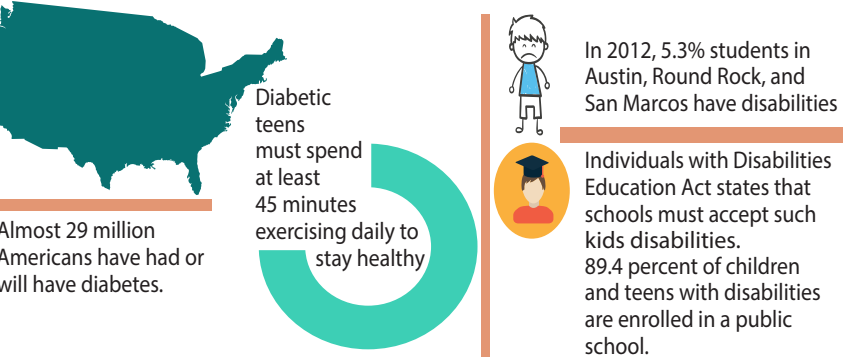
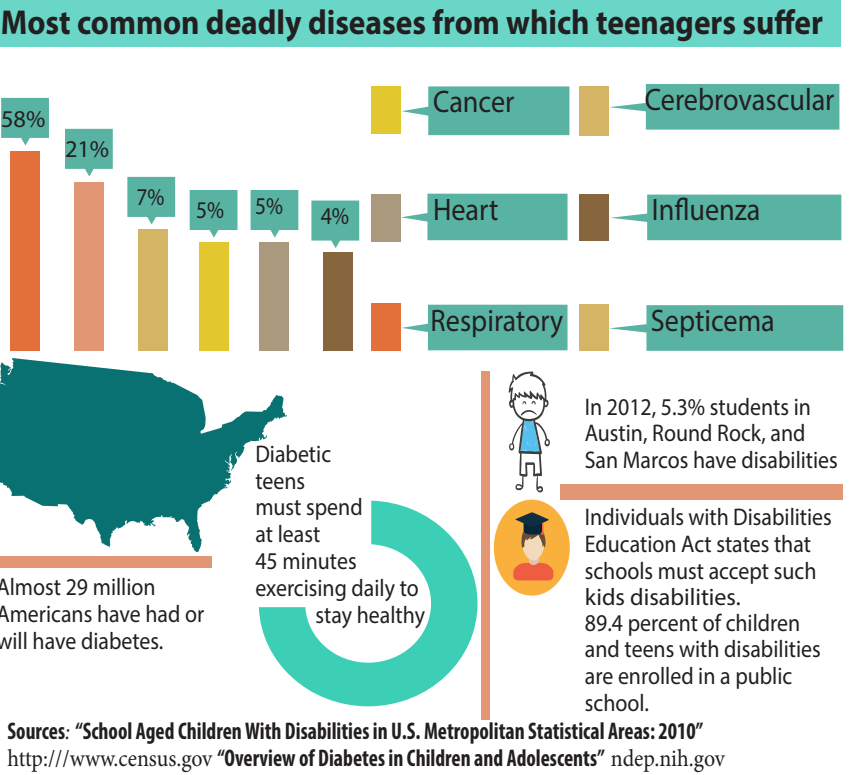
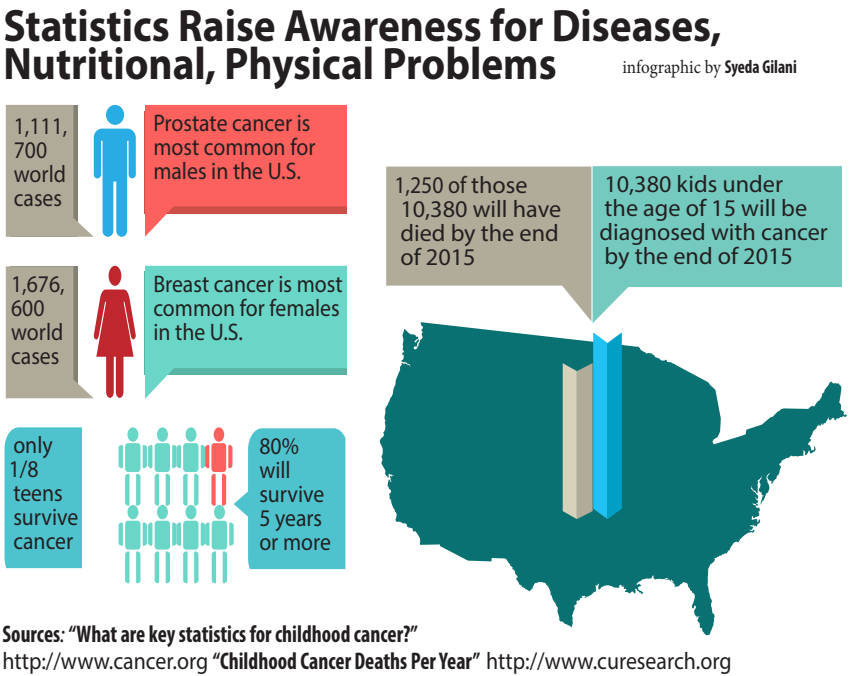
“Debate has helped me with my comprehension and knowing how to communicate,” Miller said. “At first, I didn’t really know what I was doing, but I started writing down my mistakes, and I kind of just learned. It’s a challenge, and I like to conquer those challenges.”

Debate coach Richard Colling has also taken notice of Miller’s motivation.

“He doesn’t let anything stop him as far as getting a chance to win,” Colling said. “He’s not discouraged.”

Through his efforts, Miller hopes to be able to help others like him. He sees debate as the first step on a long journey to his dream. Even though he’s in a wheelchair, it’s clear Sam Miller isn’t letting NF1 get the best of him.

“I want to help people who are struggling with certain disorders or might not necessarily have rights,” Miller said. “It makes me want to get out of bed every morning, because I feel like I can be better and do better. I’m not one that’s a quitter, so I’m going to keep doing it, even if I lose. I’d rather look past my condition and look up and make life worth living.”



Goal Tending

Freshman beats diabetic issues to stay on court

by editor **Syeda Gilani**

Sweat drips from his forehead, as freshman Mustafa Iqbal runs up and down the court dribbling the ball. He can hear the sound of his coach’s whistle, the screams of his teammates and the footsteps of the opposing players, but his eyes are on the ball. Focusing on the game, he moves for the basket.

“A basketball game to me is a matter of life and death,” Iqbal said. “I love playing the game. It

helps me think and release stress. I can forget my everyday problems and focus on one thing.”

Iqbal acts on his passion and hopes to one day play for the National Basketball Association. However, keeping his education in mind, Iqbal takes part in the STEM academy where he steps towards his engineering career.

“My dad is into engineering,” Iqbal said. “I want to be like him, but I also want to keep playing basketball. It’s a part of me and it’s how

cardiologist to perform tests. After his EKG proved normal, Iqbal rejoined the team and continued playing basketball.

“He was never scared to play,” Mrs. Iqbal said. “He was always very strong, and never mentioning his problems to me. He just kept trying and dedicating himself to his passion.”

Keeping his physical and mental health at mind, Iqbal concentrates on his current and future basketball career. He takes dietary precautions and exercises to keep up with his game.

“I love the moment when I make a basket,” Iqbal said. “There’s a pump of adrenaline when I run down the court and away from the opposing players. That kind of thrill for me doesn’t come from anything else.”



Freshman Mustafa Iqbal celebrates with his teammate and mother after his team, Power Forward, won 3rd in the YMCA Premier Basketball League.