



Amber Martin cuddles with Mylah, her new Yorkie. | PHOTO BY KIRK NEIDERMYER

"I'm still fighting": Terminally ill 17-year-old finds light in the darkest of places

By TOM KNAPP | Staff Writer | July 30, 2014

On Tuesday, Amber Martin got a puppy.

She doesn't expect to have it long.

"Her name is Mylah," she says, holding the tiny, fuzzy Yorkie in hands gone numb from the pressure of a tumor on her spine.

She decided to get a pup, Amber explains, after a relative brought her dog over to visit.

"I thought, 'Oh, I need a dog.' It was so therapeutic," she says. "But I was like, 'You're kind of limited with your time. What are you going to do with it when you die?'"

So she decided to split ownership of the dog with her best friend, Quinn Fetterman. He'll take care of Mylah, Amber says, after she's gone.

Amber, 17, is dying of cancer.

Her attitude, however, is upbeat and positive.

"I never really liked Yorkies," she confides. "But I saw her picture and I was like, 'Oh my God.' The second I saw her, I knew. I fell in love."

Quick to smile, Amber is not at all reluctant to talk about her condition, which she's facing with uncommon serenity.

"I'm actually doing very well," she says. "The last couple of weeks have been rough, but we're finally finding a happy medium with pain meds."

"Personally, I feel great."

Amber's story drew national attention in January when her family and friends surprised her with an early prom.

Just 16 at the time, she had been diagnosed with grade 4 astrocytoma, a type of cancer of the brain, just after Christmas. She wasn't expected to live to see the spring.

So, on Jan. 28, more than 200 friends and family members — including Austin Hunt, her boyfriend from Oklahoma — treated Amber [to a private prom at Rick's Place](#).

"I love it," Amber said at the time. "I love my life. I love everyone. This is the best day of my life."

She surprised everyone by making it to her birthday in May. She was even able to attend [her school prom later that month](#), this time on the arm of longtime pal Quinn.

She began planning her own funeral, picking out flowers in various shades of purple, her favorite color, and a white coffin “so all my friends can sign it with a Sharpie before they put it in the ground.”

Cancer has dogged Amber’s path before. She was diagnosed with it more than six years ago, but it went into remission. In 2011, cancer claimed the life of her father, Jay Martin.

This time, Amber says, her medical options are limited.

The tumor that’s growing in her neck won’t respond to chemotherapy, she says. And, while radiation treatments might be effective in the long term, doctors say she won’t live long enough to see the results.

“That was a no-brainer,” she says. “I’m not going to keep doing those treatments ... when I can be home, be with my friends, living my life.”

She receives daily hospice care at home, but that doesn’t mean Amber has given up.

“I’m not dead yet,” she says firmly. “A lot of people talk about me in the past tense — ‘You put up a good fight.’ Well, I’m still fighting.”

She did go through a glum period when she began losing mobility.

“She doesn’t have the use of her legs. She is bed-ridden or wheelchair-ridden,” her mother, Angela Hurst, explains. “She has limited use of her hands.

“But Amber being Amber, she has learned to send text messages using very little finger movements — and her nose. She uses her mouth to work the TV remote.

“She is an amazing, resilient person.”

Amber keeps her spirits high, her mother says.

“Maybe the first day and a half after she lost the use of her legs, that was difficult for her,” she says.

“She pouted a bit, but she got over it. She said, ‘If that’s what God wanted to take from me, fine. I’ll do other things. I’m going to make the best of it.’ ”

Amber on Wednesday demonstrated how well she can text, holding her phone loosely in shaking hands, using her nose to open a text window to Quinn.

She reluctantly uses her phone’s talk-to-text function.

“My mom uses talk-to-text,” Amber complains. “I don’t want to do that — old people use it.”

Then she laughs. “But now I use it. I’m done being embarrassed. I want to be able to talk to my friends.”

She admits she had a hard time coming to grips with her limitations.

“I was angry that I couldn’t use my hands,” she says. “I was avoiding my friends for a while — I didn’t want them to see me like this. But I want to see my friends.

“I’m not a sad person,” she adds. “It’s just frustrating when you’re a teenager and you see other teenagers doing all those things that you know you’re never going to do again.

“It’s getting better now. I’m accepting it. I can be angry, or I can choose to find the best in my situation. Anger wasn’t doing anything for me.”

Amber says she’s grateful to the people — from close friends to total strangers — who [have rallied around her and her family](#).

“It’s a lot easier just knowing people are praying for me,” she says.

If anything, Amber hopes she’s a good example to others.

“I want to bring as many people to Christ as I can,” she says. “You need to be a light to the world. You need to shine bright.”

In fact, she’s getting a tattoo on her forearm, Amber says — a lighthouse shining through a storm and a reference to her favorite Bible verse, Matthew 5:14-15.

“I want people to remember me in a good way,” she adds. “That’s on my bucket list.”

It bugs her, though, that no one can give her a definite answer on her own mortality.

“It could be one to two weeks. It could be a steady decline over a couple months,” she says. “No one has any clue. That’s one of my biggest pet peeves — not knowing.

“But it means I have to live every day like it’s my last. You don’t know when a goodbye is really goodbye.”

Relaxing in bed, with pictures of her two proms on the wall, Amber says she’s at peace.

“I’m getting close to the end. I’m going to see my dad soon,” she says.

“You can never feel 100 percent at peace knowing you’re dying. But I know where I’m going. I know who I’m going to see. And my family is going to be taken care of. ... How can you not be content with that?”