

# Survivor Spotlight

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**Maria Emilia Strickland**



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***3/17/2000-12/11/2006***

When Maria Emilia Strickland was two years old, her family and friends started noticing changes in her demeanor. She had developed a weakness on her right side, resulting in a limp and a decreased ability to use her right hand. Obviously, something was affecting this active and precocious child.

On December 14, 2002, Maria underwent a CAT scan. The results of the scan identified a brain tumor about the size of a baseball, and this tumor was pressing against a portion of the brain which controls body movement. After further testing, surgery was deemed the best option. The surgery was performed without problems on December 17, 2002. After the pathology testing, the tumor was reported as a Giant Cell Astrocytoma, a benign, slow growing tumor. The surgeon was confident that he had removed all of the necessary tissue. The main concern now was that little Maria heals from the surgery.

Periodic follow-up testing showed no re-occurrence of a tumor until January 2004. A MRI showed a small tumor even though Maria was asymptomatic. Once again, options were discussed and surgery was chosen as the best course of action. Maria's second surgery was performed on April 2, 2004, when she was just four years old. The pathology of this tumor was mixed; portions of the tumor were, again, a Giant Cell Astrocytoma but there was also an area consisting of aggressively growing cells. This area greatly concerned the doctors. They felt Maria must have six weeks of radiation in hopes that any remaining tumor cells would be destroyed.

Six weeks after her radiation treatments were completed, a repeat MRI was performed. The news was not good. A third and aggressively growing tumor was found. Randy, Maria's father, remembers that this was the first time the word "malignant" had been used. Again, this tumor was removed through surgery and identified as Rhabdoid, a rare form of cancer and difficult to treat. Maria underwent four months of chemotherapy.

Even having endured three surgeries, radiation and chemo treatments, Randy remarks, "Maria is otherwise a healthy, happy young lady who is full of love. She is very active and intelligent. She has accepted her treatment with courage

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and has endeared herself to all of the doctors, nurses, admin[istrative] staff, as well as the staff here at the Ronald McDonald House where we have been since April. She has recovered remarkably from all of her operations thus far and she is in excellent shape to beat this tumor also."

At age six, Maria was diagnosed with two more brain malignancies. The fourth tumor was removed by surgery, but the fifth tumor was growing so quickly that the doctors had no viable treatment plan. Maria had already received the maximum amount of radiation allowed, and the numerous chemotherapy treatments had no effect on the tumors.

Randy writes, "We are soon returning to Alabama from Seattle, Washington to prepare for her final days. My heart is breaking knowing that she will soon be gone and I can't imagine what life will be like without her. I know that no matter how personal and how deep my sorrow is I will not be alone. Maria has touched so many lives that all who know her will be sharing my grief."

Little Maria lost her fight with cancer on December 11, 2006. Randy writes, "I have had almost four years to come to terms with the possibility of this outcome and almost four years of support through prayer, hugs, words of encouragement, and love. Although this is an excruciatingly difficult time I want to thank each of you for your continued support. It is a comfort to me that Maria was showered with love by so many. She will be missed and always loved and remembered."