

Uncommon Courage

Cooper, Ross, Tanner (a.k.a. Batman), Cheryl and Carter today, grateful for a miracle.

The Little Boy Who Could

By Shari Cohen

How Tanner Triumphed Over Cancer

"Does Tanner look O.K. to you?" Cheryl Bunch would say to her husband, Ross, out of the blue, referring to their five-month-old baby. Good-natured Ross would lift his bright-eyed, chubby-cheeked son up and make him giggle. Then the infectious smile would work its wonders. "Nothing wrong with my boy," he'd reply.



(Clockwise from above): Cooper and Carter Bunch with newborn Tanner; Tanner at 13 months with Dr. Castleberry; at two he's ready for his final surgery.

“It’s the most curable cancer for a child to get. Tanner will beat this.”

Cheryl started. “It’s Wilms’ tumor, isn’t it.” The diagnosis seemed to fall from her lips spontaneously. She remembered learning about Wilms’ as a nursing student, and she had seen some cases in her work as a neonatal nurse.

According to the National Cancer Institute, Wilms’ tumor is a pediatric cancer found in the kidney. It accounts for about six percent of all childhood cancer cases.

“It could be just an obstruction,” Dr. Brown replied, “but I’m ordering an ultrasound to be sure.”

Cheryl dropped Carter off with a neighbor and took Tanner back for the test. Sitting next to the screen, she immediately saw a large mass in her baby’s abdomen. It was unmistakable. She began to cry.

“You’re a nurse. I’m not going to try and hide this from you,” the technician said. “This is very serious.” The radiologist entered moments later and studied the screen. Cheryl tried to ignore the tears in his eyes, but she could not. The radiologist was a friend of her husband who had himself recently battled cancer.

The radiologist sighed. “I’m afraid Tanner needs to go to Children’s Hospital right away,” he said.

When Cheryl told her husband the news, Ross, familiar himself with the illness, put on his best face. “If it is Wilms’ tumor, we both know it’s the most curable cancer for a child to get,” he told her. “Tanner will beat this thing.”

A CAT scan the following day showed that the tumor was the size of a small football. “We will remove the affected kidney,” pediatric oncologist Robert Castleberry, M.D., explained, “and Tanner’s other kidney can take over. Then we’ll follow up with a nine-month round of chemotherapy.” When the usual question didn’t come, he continued. “There’s a 94 percent chance of a total cure.”

On September 7, at Children’s Hospital in Birmingham, Walter Cain, M.D., removed Tanner’s left kidney. When he came out of surgery Cheryl noticed how tiny her son looked, lying surrounded by monitors and tubes.

When the pathology report came back, Ross and Cheryl learned that Tanner had a Stage 2 cancer—it had spread to areas near the kidney. This stage still had a high cure rate, Ross knew. Yet, if he had only listened to Cheryl earlier, they might have caught it at Stage 1.

On September 10 the doctors started Tanner on a course of chemotherapy. To keep her grandson from having to go on a feeding tube, Cheryl’s mom, Carol, worked with Tanner, coaching him to eat. Singing to him as a distraction, Carol mashed baby food into a nipple and fed Tanner his bottle. When he stopped, she would make faces until he laughed, then slip the bottle back into his mouth. “Just one more week,” Cheryl told her. And then, after a week, she’d say, “He needs another week, Mom.”

Each week for three hours Tanner went to the clinic for his treatment. Over the Christmas holiday he cut four new teeth and was starting to talk. He learned to walk holding

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Tanner Samuel Bunch was born on February 19, 1999, to a chorus of joyous cheers. Besides his mother, Cheryl, a nurse, present were his aunt, Carla Ashbey, Cheryl’s sister, and his mother’s three best friends. Tanner’s father, Ross, himself a plastic surgeon, assisted the doctor in his delivery as a video camera rolled. Tanner entered the world at a healthy eight pounds, three ounces.

Back in their Tuscaloosa, Alabama, home, Tanner found his place naturally in the close-knit Bunch family. His two older brothers, 5-year-old Cooper (“He’s so cute, Mom. Can I hold him?”) and 22-month-old Carter, were as attentive as they were excited about their baby brother.

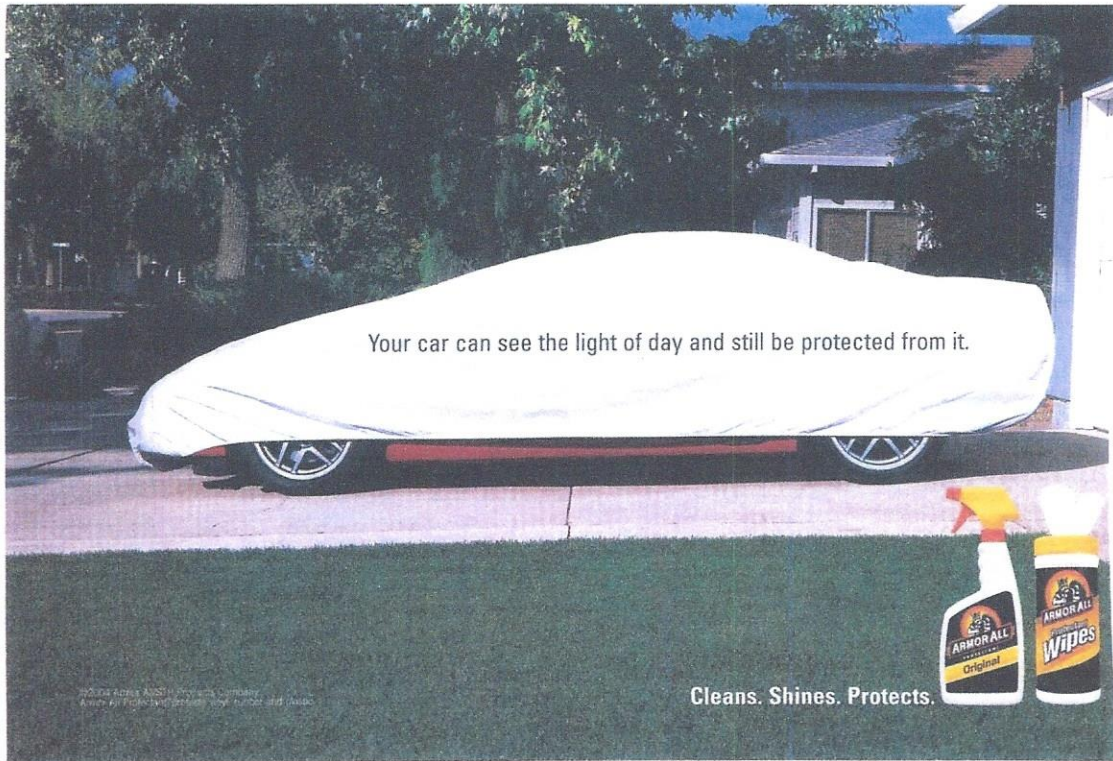
Although he was a delightful, easygoing baby, Cheryl noticed from the start that Tanner seemed to possess an extra dimension. His was an engaging spirit. He had a way of making people stop and take notice of him.

“Once his blue eyes locked on to yours, you were helpless to look away,” his cousin Lisa Lacheny recalls. “And when he laughed, it wasn’t a giggle, it was a belly laugh.”

Over the Fourth of July, Cheryl’s two former roommates from college came for a visit, with families in tow. Daily the group traveled to a nearby lake to swim and picnic. It was then, amid the squeals and laughter of the children, that the first stirrings of worry tugged at Cheryl’s heart. She felt that something was not quite right with Tanner. At five months old he appeared the picture of health. He was gaining weight and was playful. But his lack of appetite troubled her. He would stop and start nursing without any reason. “Not at all like my other boys,” she remembers. I guess a mother just worries, she figured.

And when she mentioned it, Ross would reassure her. Even so, the following month, when Carter awoke one morning with a fever, she hauled Tanner along to the doctor and requested he be checked also.

“Tanner’s weight is up,” Denise Brown, M.D., the pediatrician on duty, informed her. But when she felt his abdomen, she stopped cold. “Wait. He has a mass.”



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on to the IV pole for support. At home the boys played together, but they could sense the worry about their baby brother. One afternoon Cooper approached Cheryl with Carter beside him for support.

"Mom, is Tanner's hair going to fall out?" Cooper asked. "My friend Edward had cancer and lost his hair."

"Yes, it probably will," Cheryl told him.

"O.K.," he said. "I just wanted to know."

But Cheryl was wrong. As the weeks passed, her son managed to keep his thick head of dark hair. And he never appeared nauseated or tired from the medication.

At their three-month checkup the Bunch family's mood was upbeat. "Things look good," Dr. Castleberry said.

But in August of 2000, at a follow-up appointment, they received terrible news. "The worst day of my life," Ross remembers. He came out of the examining room, tears streaming down his face. He sat down next to Cheryl. "Tanner has a huge tumor in his left lung," he said.

"No, impossible," Cheryl said. Her denial was persistent. She offered her version. "He has a cold or pneumonia."

But Dr. Castleberry laid out the facts. "It looks very ugly," he said, his own face turning pale. "I can't believe it grew back so quickly. We need to do a CAT scan."

The news was even worse than they expected. "We found three more tumors in his right lung," the doctor said.

"Can they be removed surgically?" Ross asked.

"Too large to operate. And malignant. We have to start aggressive chemotherapy and radiation right away."

Cheryl struggled to find her voice. "What stage is Tanner at now?" she asked.

"Tanner is no longer at a stage," came the reply.

"Do you mean he is worse than a Stage 5?"

"Way past that."

Ross took the report and read through it. He realized that his son had only a small chance of survival. "He's in God's hands now," Ross concluded.

"What's wrong, Mom?" Cooper asked Cheryl while she tucked the boys in bed later that night. He realized that anguish had settled in over the Bunch home.

"Tanner has cancer again," she replied.

"Is his hair going to fall out this time?"

"I'm not sure," she told him. Cheryl didn't want to hear the next words she knew were coming.

"Is Tanner going to die, Mom?" As he began to say them, Cheryl turned and fled the room.

Soon people all across the world were praying for Ross and Cheryl's son. When Tanner was first diagnosed with cancer, Lisa Lacheny had set up a Web site to spread the word about Tanner's battle. "My cousin Tanner has cancer," she wrote. She talked about his treatment, his successes and setbacks. "Please pray for him," she pleaded.

Just two hours after the Web site went online, 300 people had signed the guestbook. Letters poured in: Buzz from Australia, Danny from Israel. Candles were lit, personal stories shared. "Prayer Warriors," Carol called them. "Full of kindness and compassion."

Dr. Castleberry told Ross and Cheryl that Tanner's

tumors were too large to start radiation immediately. He recommended they use a strong course of chemotherapy first to shrink the tumors, followed by radiation. "But," he added, "the situation looks dismal."

"Then why are we going to put Tanner through treatment if his chances are so bad?" Cheryl asked.

The doctor answered honestly. "Because we need to be able to look back and say we did everything we could."

On August 11 Tanner began weekly doses of a powerful drug called Adriamycin, referred to as "the red devil." Five days a week he also received three other drugs so strong that during the first 15 minutes a doctor had to be nearby in case of an allergic reaction. Potential side effects included fever, chills, mouth sores and hair loss. At first Tanner had to be hospitalized all five days for the treatment.

After his first dose Tanner had a reaction, grasping his chest and screaming. But after an hour his cries calmed to slight whimpers and he settled down. Over the next 24 hours he began adjusting to the potent chemicals. Within days he was laughing, making faces and being silly.

"Tanner had the nurses in stitches when they found him on his bed coloring with crayons between his toes," Cheryl recalls. In short order they heard what they had been waiting for. "He's tolerating it well. Tanner can go home and do the treatments as an outpatient."

One afternoon Cheryl brought Tanner to meet a woman named Dolores Winder who traveled the world with a prayer ministry. She asked Cheryl, "Do you believe God can help your son?" as she held Tanner close.

"I'm hoping for a miracle," Cheryl replied.

"Your son will be fine," Dolores Winder said, then said a prayer for him. "I see him as an adult. Fear is your biggest problem."

By mid-September, Tanner's condition once more began to decline. Battling side effects, he was running high fevers. Simultaneously his blood counts plummeted. He needed a blood transfusion.

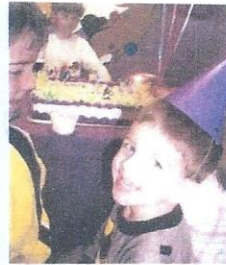
A few weeks later Cheryl looked down and saw Tanner playing on the floor holding tufts of his own hair in his hand. "This looks like a little kitty," he told her. Her heart sank. He smiled up at her. "Look at all the little kitties."

Later, when Cooper came home from school, Cheryl was prepared. "Cooper, before you go in there, I want you to know Tanner has lost his hair."

"I want to see," he said, running to find his brother.

"Look at my kitties, Cooper," Tanner announced proudly. Cooper laughed and ran his hand over Tanner's bald head. "It's not as bad as I thought it would be, Mom."

Every evening when Ross came home from work, he tried to put up a stoic front. But his heart ached when he saw the transformation in his son. "Tanner was bald with dark circles under his eyes and his skin had a sickly green sheen from the chemicals," Ross recalls. Once, while back in the hospital, Tanner's fever spiked so high, he was shaking. His



Tanner's third birthday

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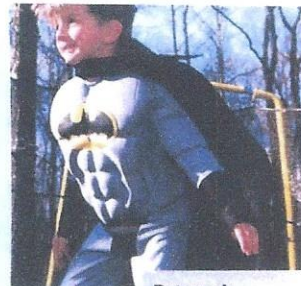
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“Tanner had the nurses in stitches by coloring with his toes.”



Batman is currently Tanner's favorite alter ego.

face had a chalklike hue. Ross whispered, “You O.K., buddy?” Ross didn’t expect an answer. But Tanner smiled weakly, and gave his dad a thumbs-up. “He’s a trooper,” Ross says.

Autumn exhausted Ross and Cheryl as they traveled back and forth to the hospital. Cheryl prayed for a miracle. “Please help our Tanner.” On October 21 a nurse tending Tanner noticed blisters popping out on his body. Within hours he was covered with them.

“Chicken pox,” the doctor diagnosed. “Now we have a new infection to deal with. A serious one.”

“How much more can he take?” Cheryl wondered.

“He’s a fighter,” Carol reminded her. “His little body keeps getting pounded, yet he finds the strength to get up and fight back.”

Connected to plastic tubes, covered head to toe in chicken pox, Tanner still managed to keep the nurses laughing. He rode up and down the plastic slide in his room until he was tied up in his IV lines. “Do we have to untangle you again?” they scolded, smiling.

In November Tanner’s radiation treatments began. In a darkened room a technician named Drew placed Tanner into a crib. Large purple marks were drawn over his body to pinpoint the areas to be radiated. For the first time since his illness had begun, Cheryl noticed fear in her son’s eyes. She asked him, “Tanner, are you scared?”

“Yes,” he answered. “I’m trying to be a big boy, but I’m scared.”

But being Tanner, at his next treatment he met his fear head-on. “O.K., Drew,” he announced. “I’m ready.”

Waiting at the hospital to hear the outcome of a January 2001 CAT scan, Tanner drew a circle on Cheryl’s arm with a marker. “What’s that?” she asked. “I’m drawing you a happy face, Mom. ‘Cause you’re sad.”

But moments later Ross entered with faces. “The chemotherapy treatments are working,” Ross told her. “The three smaller tumors have disappeared and the large tumor has shrunk by eighty percent. Looks like a deflated tire.”

And for the first time since she could remember, the fear Cheryl carried with her began to subside, giving way to a ray of hope.

On February 10, Tanners treatments finished. Dr. Castleberry took him off all medications. And finally, on Wednesday, March 14, almost one month after Tanner’s second birthday, Dr. Cain removed the remainder of the tumor. “It could not have gone any better,” he reported. “I have taken thousands of these tumors out. This one literally fell off into my hands.”

Three days later the family heard the news they had been praying for. The “tumor” contained no live cells. The cancer was gone. “Suddenly the world looked so beautiful,” Cheryl recalls. “The trees seemed greener, the sky bluer.”

On January 27, 2003, Tanner made the two-year mark. “Once children pass two years off therapy and have no problems, 95 percent of the risk is behind them,” Dr. Castleberry says.

Today Tanner is a bright and active five-year-old. He still delights others with his spirit and engaging laugh. “His world is full of imagination and curiosity,” his grandmother says.

Recently Tanner became infatuated with superheroes. Dressed in Batman pajamas, a Superman cape and Spiderman shoes, he holds his arms out straight and runs from room to room. In his make-believe world Tanner has great strength. He’s a brave fighter and people all over the world admire him.

“Isn’t it amazing?” Cheryl says. “In the real world we feel the same.” **FC**