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An Instant Leftie

By Cathy Dausman



Audrey Price, left, with her mother, Barbara
Photo Cathy Dausman

Audrey Price became a "leftie" last June, on Friday the 13th. For weeks Audrey, a Stanley Middle School eighth grader, had experienced a gradual, unexplained weakening on her right side, causing her to drop things - noticeably when playing tennis. Eight weeks of physical therapy only left the Lafayette teen with increased one-sided weakness.

A physical exam scheduled the end of May came back "abnormal" and resulted in a referral for an MRI. Audrey learned she had a brain aneurysm, specifically a cerebral saccular aneurysm attached to an artery at the base of her brain.

"You learn a lot from your child," Barbara Price said about her daughter's journey from perplexed athlete to patient, rehab role model and happy, successful Campolindo High School freshman. Doctors told the Price family the aneurysm Audrey had most likely had been growing slowly for years, pressing on the left side of her brain stem, and presenting itself only as body weakness.

She had experienced no headaches; felt no pain. The aneurysm had not burst; it simply continued to grow until it was larger than 99 percent of similar aneurysms.

Before then the most traumatic event in her life had been an appendectomy two years earlier. On her first day of summer last June, Price

underwent a seven-and-a-half hour brain surgery during which a UC San Francisco neurologist and team of 12 deflated the aneurysm and re-established normal blood flow to the area.

The surgery was to be routine; unfortunately Audrey awoke unable to move her right side, likely from surgical trauma and the distortion the aneurysm had caused pushing on the brain stem. Her expected 10-day hospital stay ballooned into a six week period of lost summer vacation days, and physical, speech and occupational therapies six hours daily six days a week.

Occupational therapist Kristina Schmieder met Price shortly after surgery, when she was still grieving the body she'd had. Schmieder recalls the girl's tears of frustration. "She just wanted to go back to how she was before," Schmieder said.

Soon, though, Schmieder saw her attitude shift. An OT works with patients to restore daily living activities, and as Audrey's mother explained, her daughter "has had to learn to rehabilitate her entire right side."

With Schmieder's help, Audrey relearned how to stand, walk, bathe, dress, cook and groom herself. "Soon therapy became similar to a high school cafeteria or gathering place where Audrey informed us of all things going on," Schmieder said.

Rehab was filled with laughter, dancing and singing intertwined with wistful thoughts about what her sister and friends were doing with their summers.

Audrey left the hospital for home July 25. She returned to San Francisco in October to receive a Colin Powell medal of courage for her hard work as a UCSF Benioff patient. The family even managed its annual Wisconsin vacation before Audrey began a new school year as a Campolindo

High School freshman.

Audrey still wears an ankle brace, which she hopes to shed by April, and hopes the weakness and tremors in her right hand will disappear. She laughed at the notion of being called ambidextrous, saying she writes left-handed or uses Dragon Dictation while taking class notes. She is grateful her classrooms are close together and that a classmate or two will help carry her books, although she notes "adults are a lot more empathetic (to my situation)."

As a preventative measure, the entire family has had MRI tests with normal results and will repeat the tests every five years. Audrey remains positive about the disappointments thrown her way last summer, insisting, "There are many silver linings that come with a struggle."

"Once my body heals, I'll play sports," she said.

Learn more about cerebral aneurysms at:

<http://tinyurl.com/mtyrk5e>

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[back](#)

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