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WKU student driven to help others after surviving brush with death

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Grant Oller (center) lays in his hospital bed in Norton Children's Hospital student at WKU where he helps raise money for "Dance Big Red" which is a benefit dance for the hospital.

Photo submitted by Dana Matukas, Communications Project Manager at Norton HealthCare

It was supposed to be another fun weekend in high school for Grant Oller.

Oller, then 16, and his friends had spent a Friday night in their junior year at Daviess County High School attending a dance.

But things took a turn for the worse in coming hours as he developed a slight cough by the end of the night, and that slight cough led to the most dramatic and frightening moments of Oller's life.

By the time that weekend in 2018 ended, he was hospitalized with bilateral pneumonia. His cough and condition had worsened to the point where his oxygen levels had tumbled to concerning levels.

His levels kept decreasing, and he was flown to Norton Children's Hospital in Louisville.

"The last thing I remember is being flown out on a helicopter," Oller said. "Then before I knew it, it was November and I was lying in a hospital bed weighing only 100 pounds."

Shortly after arriving in Louisville, he had become unresponsive after developing acute respiratory distress syndrome, a severe condition that causes fluid to leak into the lungs.

His parents were now forced to make life-and-death decisions about their son.

They had to give their blessing to let the doctors place him on a life-saving device called an ECMO, putting him in a medically induced coma.

“We didn’t really know what was going on first,” said the young man’s father, Nick Oller. “Things then escalated very quickly. All kinds of emotions went through our heads as he had to fly to Louisville all by himself. We drove very fast there with our blinkers on as we drove over 100 mph the whole way.”

“We just leaned on the guidance of the doctors, and we knew that we had to trust their advice,” Grant’s mother, Kelly Oller, said of their decision to put Grant on the ECMO device.

For the next 31 days, the two parents had to watch their son in a hospital bed. During that time, his blood pressure was astronomically high, and his oxygen levels were still often low.

“Every day was a different day,” Nick Oller said. “It was an emotional roller coaster. It’s not easy to see your son have four chest tubes in him. We can’t say enough for the care he was given and the job all the doctors and nurses gave. We prayed a lot. God has a funny way of getting you to pray.”

“They really didn’t know how he would react coming out of the coma,” Kelly Oller said. “We prepared for the worst. We just wanted him to wake up.”

While he may have been alone physically in his bed at Norton's, Grant Oller was certainly not alone in spirit.

His parents stayed at his bedside throughout the ordeal while his friends back home sent him messages and set up fundraisers for him at Daviess County High School.

His girlfriend, Avery Ford, even made T-shirts and regularly wrote social media posts that updated the public about his health.

Finally, Grant Oller woke up from his coma at the end of that 31-day stretch.

However, the road back to normality had just started.

"A lot of people may think that waking up from a coma is like waking up from an overnight sleep," Grant Oller said. "Especially in my case, I was on so much pain medication that I had to be slowly taken off of that. My body would've had a bad response otherwise."

Due to the high levels of medication, he still doesn't remember waking up. For the first handful of days Grant Oller was awake, everything was still "fuzzy" as he slowly came off his medication.

In following weeks, he experienced panic attacks and anxiety episodes that he had never felt before. But finally, his medication decreased greatly, and Grant Oller finally began to feel like his old self.

In late November, he was moved to a rehab facility where he went through physical therapy under the guidance of Dr. Scott Bickel.

Powered by the love and support of his family friends, Grant Oller pushed through and ended the physical therapy process in just three weeks. He finally returned home Dec. 21, 2018.

“The positivity which he approached that process can’t be understated,” Bickel said. “Him and his family approached it with joy. He recovered relatively quickly. It was pretty impressive.”

Not only did Grant Oller make it home for the holidays, but he was also able to fully return to school and reunite with his friends Jan. 2.

“That’s when I felt like I started to get back into the swing of things,” Grant Oller said. “I still didn’t weigh a lot, but going back to school and being around people I knew is when I felt normal. It really felt like a turning point.”

Fast forward to the present, and the Ollers are now experiencing the two-year anniversary of Grant returning home from his coma.

“This time of year, I find myself being more appreciative a lot more,” Grant Oller said. “It’s a reminder that it’s not guaranteed to have simple things in life. The holidays are definitely more special now. It really changed my perspective on life in general.”

Despite making a near full comeback, 2020 hasn’t been the easiest for him amid the COVID-19 pandemic. With it being a respiratory disease, Grant Oller has had to miss out on some opportunities to be around family and friends because of extra precautions.

There are also some lingering effects from his traumatic ordeal. His lungs still have some scarring because of the tubes and surgeries.

“Compared to where I was two years ago and even one year ago, I am drastically better,” Grant Oller said. “Lungs heal, they just take time. As of now, I am pretty much back to normal. I can go out and play basketball with my friends.”

After visiting and falling in love with Western Kentucky University’s campus his senior year, Grant Oller is now attending WKU. He quickly joined a student-led organization that supports Norton Healthcare called “Dance Big Red.”

Through this organization, he is able to share his story and raise money for the hospital that helped save his life. Considering his ordeal first began after a dance, it’s only

fitting that Dance Big Red is what he is using to tell the ending of his story.

“WKU has been great,” Grant Oller said. “This semester has been up-and-down with remote learning. One of the ups has been Dance Big Red. It’s an awesome organization and it’s becoming a family for me.”

For his future, the Honors College enrollee wants to continue to give back.

Currently majoring in biology and minoring in chemistry, Grant Oller plans on going to medical school.

“It’s tremendously humbling to hear that he wants to pursue medicine,” Bickel said. “His drive I saw in his rehab process proves he will have success.”

“We are super excited for him,” Nick Oller said. “We look forward to what the future holds for him. I believe he will stick with it. Hopefully, he will be able to save some lives of his own one day.”

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