

HILL COUNTRY NEWS

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High School Hero Jayelen Gray

His face told the whole story. A passionate mix of joy, relief, and excitement was all that was left when the burden was finally removed.

Jayelen Gray was cancer free.

After fighting a rare form of soft tissue cancer for the better part of three years, the senior Vandegrift linebacker announced the disease had subsided this July and he would be attacking his final year on the field with extra vigor.

"It was one of the most memorable moments of my life," he said. "I was really excited. I just wanted to get back into football shape right away."

Leading up to the scan this summer, Jayelen's uncle, Barry Gray, didn't even want to talk about the possibilities. If the second round of chemo didn't work, he didn't have any ideas as to what would come next.

The whole process had roughed Jayelen up. First, it was radiation, which reduced the size of the mass in his right wrist. Then, after the cancer cells spread to his biceps, it was chemo which again helped with the healing. Finally, a second wave of chemo with a different drug finally sent the cells in remission.

The family walked out of the hospital together, smiling and high-fiving, encouraged at what the upcoming football season held.

"I probably should've taken a picture," Barry said.

He will have scans every six months to make sure the cancer has not returned. If those go well, the length between check-ups will expand to every couple of years, and then every five years, and so on until he doesn't have to go anymore.

Jayelen holds his parents close to his heart. His mother passed away at birth due to complications with the delivery. His father, Anthony, died six years ago after suffering a stroke, which struck the then-middle schooler to his core.

He moved in with his aunt Nicole and uncle Barry after his seventh grade year, and they have been with him every step of the way.

Jayelen was a promising player from the moment he walked on to the Vandegrift football field for the first time. After a successful year in his first year with the Vipers, head coach Drew

Sanders and his staff suggested he try shot put to work on strength and conditioning for the rest of the school year.

The first time he ever threw the heavy metal ball, a bruise formed on his right wrist. There was no pain and he had full range of motion. At first, he tried ice, heat, and general treatment thinking it would go away over time.

It didn't.

After a few trips to the doctor, the family went to St. David's and the first surgery was performed to get a biopsy. Epithelioid sarcoma accounts for less than one percent of all soft tissue cancers and most commonly shows up in young adults.

"I cried that whole night," Jayelen said. "The doctor told me that I couldn't play football and that just made me tighten up like a ball. My teammates helped me get through it and they were motivating me to push through everything. If it wasn't for them I wouldn't be in this situation right now."

The surgeon at MD Anderson Cancer Center first took out the cancerous muscle. He then removed a muscle from Jayelen's back and put it in his wrist before pulling a skin graft from his thigh to get it functioning again.

At first, the surgeon had problems getting blood to flow back to the arm. But more than 12 hours later, Jayelen emerged with full range of motion.

The surgery forced Jayelen to miss most of his sophomore year, but after the surgery, he returned for his junior season and played in nine games and made 27 tackles, good for sixth amongst underclassmen that season.

After more scans and more tests, doctors noticed spots on his lungs and advised a more aggressive approach with chemotherapy. For six months, from January to June, Jayelen had treatments through a port in his right shoulder.

"The only good thing was I got to miss school," he said.

With football on the horizon as his junior year trudged on, he still had his eyes firmly fixed on the field. Chemo be damned.

"In the spring, he went through chemo and practiced 80 percent of the days with the chemo port in his shoulder," Drew Sanders said. "You see another guy over there complaining about his ankle and you're like 'I don't want to hear about it.' We all just kind of pointed at Jayelen. His leadership is amazing."

Sanders said the coaching staff pretty much let Jayelen decide what he was up for on a daily basis. But he stayed positive and he had his teammates encouraging him on a daily basis to help him get through the tough days.

Barry can't put a price tag on what the community, without prompting, did to help the family through the entire process. There was a car wash that raised a lot of money. People would back and forth from the doctor's office and hospitals for check-ups.

The week of the first diagnosis was the same week Vandegrift hosted LISD rival Cedar Park. The Timberwolves pulled out a gut wrenching fourth quarter win, but it was what happened after that Barry will remember.

Then-sophomore quarterback Mak Sexton approached Jayelen after the game and the two teams joined together at the center of the field for a postgame prayer.

"It kind of transcended the game," Barry said. "After the kids battled so hard on the field, they had the kindness in their hearts to take it back to someone who was struggling with a much bigger battle."

Football has been a stabilizing beacon of hope for Jayelen. It was one of the first things he thought about after his diagnosis and has kept him grounded through the whole process with the motivation that he would eventually continue his high school career.

"People haven't seen it as much because he played last year with cancer, but he's a really good player," Sanders said. "There are just a lot of people that bash kids these days. This is our hope for the future. It's in great hands with young men like this and young men like Jayelen."

Jayelen has been through more adversity before high school graduation than many people have in a lifetime. He understands the pressure of being an inspiration and is honored that some of his younger teammates look up to him.

His message to them is one that, like his journey, transcends the football field.

"I want to inspire them to do better things," he said. "When I go through stuff, I try to push through it and I want them to push through it too."