

The Free Lance-Star

Popular ballplayer battling cancer again

Cancer is back in popular North Stafford High School student, whose attitude remains positive

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Justin Whitaker's cancer has returned, and he desperately needs a bone marrow transplant.

But the 18-year-old North Stafford High School student who dreamed of being a baseball player remains as positive as ever, said his father, Craig.

"His attitude is great. He's the kid that won't quit," Craig said. "He's stronger than I am."



Justin was diagnosed with an aggressive cancer called T-cell lymphoma in June 2006 and fought his way back to some semblance of a normal routine. When his joints hurt so much he could barely walk, he still went to baseball practice and made the varsity squad last spring.

Then in August, he felt another lump on his neck, and tests showed the cancer had returned to his chest and lungs. Justin is getting regular transfusions because his blood and platelet levels are low.

The family hopes Justin will find a bone-marrow donor and have surgery by December.

"Or he won't make it," his father said.

Justin's determination--and support from friends and the school community--has remained constant. He was well enough to make a "guest appearance" at a North Stafford football game last month, and the cheering section stood up and chanted, "Welcome Back, Justin."

Students visit him regularly at Inova Fairfax Hospital when he's hospitalized for chemotherapy treatments. His girlfriend, Courtney Crews, videotapes school events for him.

Justin is focusing on graduating in June. He needs one more credit, and he's working with the school to earn it between hospitalizations.

"This is a cancer that you just don't catch a break with but we're keeping our fingers crossed," Craig said. "And Justin is like, 'Dad, don't worry. I'm gonna beat this.'"