

● Spreading Smiles

“Every day is a gift!”

Lightning isn't supposed to strike the same place twice. So for Arin Prisant, it was unfathomable that even as her mom Hannah's cancer returned, she was diagnosed herself. Yet this amazing mother/daughter duo found a way to help heal hearts—including Arin's own . . .

Perched on the sterile white sheets, eight-year-old Arin Prisant held a pen in one hand, a word search book in the other.

Being in the hospital wasn't new or unusual territory for Arin. For as long as she could remember, she had been visiting her mom, Hannah, there.

Sometimes, though, it made Arin a little sad. Because her mom couldn't be home, tucking her into bed at night. Because her mom was *sick*.

Still, Hannah somehow managed to make even being in the hospital fun. They'd color in coloring books. Play “go fish.” Make the wind-up toys Hannah collected hop across her hospital tray. And, looking up at her mom, Arin knew: Even if we are stuck here, we are lucky to have each other . . .”

The best mom ever

When doctors first diagnosed 27-year-old Hannah with nasal cancer, they told her she wouldn't survive. But Hannah—a self-proclaimed eternal optimist—refused to believe them.

Through multiple surgeries and radiation to her head and neck, Hannah would hold fast to photos of two-year-old curly-topped Arin.

“Look at all I have to live for,” she'd wink at Arin's dad. And though her treatments destroyed her sense of smell, left her with trouble swallowing and rendered her unable to have another child, Hannah—or Hannah Banana, as everyone affectionately called her—defied the odds.

“Wake up, sleepyhead. Come on, get out of bed!” she'd sing to Arin each morning.

When it was her turn to carpool to school, Hannah would crank up

the radio to play “name that tune.” She was Arin's Brownie troop leader. And when it came to birthdays, Hannah was so grateful to have another one of her own that she pulled out all the stops.

“Every day is a gift,” she'd declare. “But birthdays are really meant to be celebrated!”

Still, Hannah ended up in the hospital frequently, due to complications from her radiation. Yet even there, she and Arin always found ways to laugh, playing Scrabble or creating silly stories with *Mad Libs*.

By the time Arin was in college, though, she couldn't help but notice that not everybody in the hospital had somebody to visit her. And she vowed that someday, she would find some way to brighten other patients' hospital stays, if only for a little while.

Years passed. Then, not long after Arin's 31st birthday, Hannah's cancer returned. And this time, it was terminal.

She was grown now. Yet still, Arin wanted to scream: It's too soon! I can't lose her! She's my *mom*.

So to find some purpose and honor Hannah's joyful spirit, Arin decided to create the Hannah Banana Foundation (HannahBanana.org).

“Mom,” Arin said. “I want to give special gift bags to people who are hospitalized.”

Inspired, Hannah herself drew the foundation's logo, a banana wearing red high heels, her favorite.

But soon after, Arin received more devastating news: She herself had a tumor in her right breast.

She would need chemotherapy, then surgery. This time, in the hospital, she was the patient. But even as an IV dripped into her arm, she



“Sometimes just knowing someone cares makes you feel better!” says Arin, with the cheery gift bags she gives to patients.

and Hannah entered a coloring contest and laughed as they folded origami animals. And soon after, both were all smiles while attending the foundation's first fund-raiser, Arin with a colorful scarf to disguise her baldness; Hannah on a scooter with an oxygen tank in tow.

The event was a resounding success. But eight days later, Hannah lost her courageous battle. And all Arin could think was: How do you go on when you've lost the very person who made you *you*!

Healing hearts

In the weeks that followed, so many friends gathered in Arin's tiny Manhattan apartment there was barely room to stand. And as they helped her tuck crossword puzzle books, playing cards, needlework kits and journals into bright yellow gift bags to relieve patients' boredom and help pass the time while they were waiting for chemo or healing from surgery, Arin felt as if her mom was still there, right beside her.

That first giveaway—1,200 bags delivered to five area hospitals!—somehow gave Arin strength. The strength to face another day of radiation. And with every thank-you note that poured in, Arin found her heart healing a little more, too.

The smiley face pen really did make me smile! one patient wrote.

Being sick is lonely, a 55-year-old woman named Jane penned.

But it made me feel good to think someone cared to think about me. And 44-year-old Daisy wrote, “I cannot thank you enough for your gift. God bless you!”

Even Arin's own dad said, “You know, honey, when your mom was going through her radiation, she had you. And now you have this project.”

Today, the Hannah Banana Foundation visits hospitals across the New York-New Jersey area, and has cheered tens of thousands of patients! Rarely does a day go by without at least one thank-you card arriving.

“A merry heart doeth good, like medicine.”

PROVERBS 17:22

“When I have a bad day—and I don't have many, being my mother's daughter—and I come home to that gratitude, I am reminded that simple things can bring such joy and that what we're doing makes a difference,” says Arin, now cancer-free herself. “And I know my mom would be very proud and happy that her legacy to make other people smile is living on!”

—Kristin Higson-Hughes



Make someone smile!

✔ **Listening!** “My mother was the best listener, secret keeper and caring friend,” Arin says. Being there—whether in person, via Skype or on the phone—so your friend can vent her frustrations will ease her burden!

✔ **Remembering the details!** “Don't just ask about a friend's weekend, ask her about an activity she had planned,” Arin suggests. “Showing you care about her interests will make you feel closer!”

✔ **Complimenting her!** “Giving your friend an honest compliment is a great way to give her a boost,” Arin suggests. “And seeing her gratitude from your praise will likely make you smile, too!”

✔ **Penning a note!** “Choosing a card is fun when you know she'll be surprised to receive it, giggle at it and maybe hang it on her fridge,” Arin says. No time to shop? Write her a note and leave it somewhere unexpected!

Cheer up a friend, like Arin does, by . . .