

Battling cancer while the world watches

Glamour's Erin Zammett Ruddy bonds with MTV's Diem Brown over their very public struggles with cancer—and their determination to beat it.

in 2001 Erin Zammett Ruddy, now 28, was diagnosed with chronic myelogenous leukemia (CML), a cancer that until recently proved fatal for many patients. For four years, she's chronicled her experiences in these pages. Now in remission, Erin recently met up with Diem Brown, a 25-year-old ovarian cancer survivor who's known for her role on MTV's *Real World/Road Rules Challenge: Fresh Meat*, to trade cancer war stories and get inspiration for the challenges ahead.

Enough about me

About a month ago a friend forwarded me an article about Diem Brown, MTV's tiny, blond reality show dynamo. In September 2005, just after being selected for the show, Diem, then 24, was diagnosed with stage 2 ovarian cancer (only 30 percent of women survive advanced stages of the disease). She had one of her ovaries, several lymph nodes and part of one of her fallopian tubes removed. One month later, she headed to Australia for five weeks to compete in intense made-for-MTV endurance tests, like hanging onto a fake alligator while it spun her like a rotisserie chicken. The more I read about her and the more I watched (those shows are addictive!), the more I wanted to meet her. We seemed to have a lot in common, especially our openness about our experiences—Diem let MTV follow her through treatment for a documentary that could air this fall. And she came into my life at the perfect time. As I wrote in my last column, I'm considering going off Gleevec—the drug that put me into remission—to have a baby. From the moment that issue hit newsstands, I've been inundated with letters and e-mails and opinions. *Lots* of opinions. Many believe I'm crazy to risk my life; others say to follow my heart. Just as I was starting to get really overwhelmed, I met Diem. This girl had no idea if she'd



Walking in New York City with Brown, right

survive, let alone have children, and she was swimming with sharks and hanging 50 feet in the air while blindfolded?! Surely I could find a way to stay positive about my own uncertain future. I sat down with Diem, who's now in remission, to see how she's handling it all.

Q What's the first thing you did when you found out you had cancer?

I stormed out of my apartment and went for a long drive, then parked the car and bawled. I had no idea why this was happening to me. I'm a healthy girl: I'm a vegetarian; I don't smoke; I barely drink. I kept thinking, I have so much to do; I'm not ready to die. Then I went on the Internet and it basically said, oh, you have about a year to live. →

REBECCA GREENFIELD; STYLIST: LANA CHU; HAIR: DANIEL HAMMOND FOR MARK EDWARD INC.; MAKEUP: J. PATRICK FOR BLINK MANAGEMENT

Q Cancer should come with the warning label “Do not Google me.” Other than the diagnosis, what was the toughest part?

Telling my family. A few years ago my mom passed away, and I didn’t want to put them through any more pain. I’m the oldest of four and have become a sort of mother figure to my sisters and brother. I was especially nervous to tell my dad, and we’re incredibly close. He’s a strong military man, and I was terrified to hear his voice crack. When I finally told him, I could literally hear his fear of losing someone else. Then my sister Megan told me that later that day she saw him with his head in his hands, crying. That broke my heart.

Q After a cancer diagnosis, many people would not have wanted to go on a reality TV show. Why did you?

I’m a very athletic person and I love extreme sports, so when I made it on the show, I was thrilled. After I was diagnosed, I knew that if cancer kept me from going, I’d be so depressed heading into treatment. My doctor gave me some rules, but he said I could do whatever I felt up for. I know it sounds cheesy, but I felt doing the show would give me the strength to get through cancer.

Q I didn’t want anyone to feel sorry for me, which they always do when you have cancer. How’d you deal with that?

I’m the same way! I’ve always been the fixer for my friends, the one everyone comes to. I never ask for help. I even went for my first chemo treatment by myself. Then I walked into the infusion room and saw people with no hair, on oxygen, and I thought, that’s going to be me. I turned white and the nurses had to keep me from passing out because I was so scared. I realized then that I couldn’t do it alone. From that point on, a friend always came with me.



Brown wears a L4TC necklace, in support of her new charity.

Q What about children? Can you still have them?

I don’t know. Since I have only one ovary now and it may be damaged from the chemo, it could be difficult. But I don’t want to worry about things I can’t control, or get ahead of myself. I need a man before I can have a baby!

Q Writing about my cancer experience has been incredibly cathartic. What was it like for you shooting the documentary?

It was like therapy. They gave me a camera to record video diaries. I didn’t like talking to people about my cancer, but I could complain to that camera all day long! I’m nervous about it airing. It’s really raw—I’m bald, I’m not wearing makeup and I get really low at points. But I think it’ll help other people see that cancer doesn’t have to be a death sentence. I got through it, and so can they.

Q You have such a great attitude. How do you stay so positive?

I realized I can go through this and be sad and vengeful, or I can try to find the good in it and help other people. I started a charity, Live for the Challenge, to help patients with expenses. I was fortunate that I had good insurance, but I still needed financial help for things like a wig and medications. And I’m not the only one. Liveforthechallenge.com allows patients of all kinds to create a medical registry, which is just like a wedding registry. But instead of asking for a blender, they get things they need for hospital stays, treatment and recovery.

Q Wow, you’ve accomplished so much. What gives you inspiration?

My little sister Faith. She’s only 12 and she’s already seen so much of life that she shouldn’t have had to yet. But it’s amazing how children seem to have an innocence and sensibility that help them to deal with things that you never think they’ll be able to handle. I remember one day, when my hair was falling out in clumps, she said, “Your hair looks great! You’re going to be fine. Just keep going.” That was all I needed. I want to make her proud. I want her to be able to say, “Look what my big sister did. She beat cancer.” ©

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