

## **'My daughter was given 3 months to live - I won't let this Christmas be her last'**

A mum is in a desperate fight to save her young daughter's life after she was given a devastating cancer diagnosis.

Nicola Caton's daughter Isla is just seven years old and has been fighting the disease since she was two.

Her family, from Stratford, East London, have been searching all over trying to find the right treatment and clinical trial which would help her, after a doctor gave her just three months to live.

For mum Nicola, this has been five years of seeing her daughter battle the aggressive cancer.

"Before she was unwell, we used to call her 'bam bam'. She was full of energy," Nicola said.

"She was a big, bouncy baby. Then, she was unwell for three months before she even got a diagnosis."

Suddenly when Isla was just two, everything changed.

Nicola noticed that she was losing weight, had high temperatures and was always in pain and rubbing her legs.

She took Isla to the hospital a number of times and said that "A&E said I was being over-sensitive about everything".

Nicola knew something was wrong and insisted on Isla being checked out.

Eventually, she went to a private doctor.

She said: "When he examined her and saw how much weight she lost, he turned to me and said 'I think this is something serious'.

"They did an ultrasound. He told us it was cancer.

"I fainted. We never dreamed this would happen to our big, healthy baby."

Isla had been diagnosed with Neuroblastoma, a rare type of cancer that mostly affects babies or young children, and started treatment at Great Ormond Street Hospital.

It was there that Nicola met families with children going through a similar situation to Isla.

"When we first started fundraising, the other families told us that Neuroblastoma is extremely hard to cure if you relapse," she said.

"There is only a 40 per cent chance of survival at the beginning."

As treatment began on Isla, the plan was to get her into remission and take her to America for a clinical trial.

Nicola said: "If we could get Isla into remission, there was a vaccine in America that would hopefully prevent the cancer from relapsing."

Sadly, Isla relapsed before she finished her frontline treatment, as doctors found a brain tumour, which was then removed.

As the family tried to fundraise for another treatment in the US, Isla relapsed again. There were now several spots on her bones.

She said: "In July 2018, our consultant basically looked at us and said. 'Take her home. She's got three months to live'."

This news was heartbreaking for the family but Nicola could never give up hope for her little girl.

She reached out to doctors worldwide about Neuroblastoma and spoke to parents going through the same turmoil.

She said: "The consultant called us and said Isla only has a two per cent chance of survival now.

"I said, 'why can't Isla be different?'"

It's this sheer determination that caused the family to fundraise to give Isla a better chance at life and hopefully find a cure.

The family spent two years in Barcelona and the family were accessing trial after trial to try and get Isla back into remission.

Things seemed to look up for her when she went into remission but in February 2020, she relapsed again.

Nicola said: "In Spain, we spent around £550,000 on medical bills. It was really hard, there were constant bills, paying for our house in the UK.

"Our only focus was on getting Isla back into remission."

At the start of the pandemic in March 2020, the family left Spain and moved back to London.

This was a devastating blow to the family as they couldn't go out and fundraise or access any treatment.

"We weren't able to access any treatments," Nicola explained. "We made a decision that after July that we wouldn't be able to go back to Spain.

"Thankfully we found something on the NHS but unfortunately it didn't work. Then on Christmas Eve, they told us it was not working.

"Since then it's just been chemotherapy to chemotherapy. Trying to hold the cancer at bay."

Nicola feels sad for Isla. She doesn't know any different and has missed out on a number of things just trying to live.

Nicola said: "She was miserable in Spain. She missed her sister. For the last five years, I've focused on saving her life.

"We had to make a decision on whether we gave her a great life or tried to save it.

"At the beginning of 2021, I vowed to give her the best life possible. We'd really like to make a lot of memories and let her enjoy everything."

The plan for December is to have Father Christmas visit their home and spend quality time with the rest of the family. In the New Year, they want to be able to take her to CBeebies.

Nicola added: "The thing you miss most in the world is normality. Just being around family and having her home."

A big part of Isla's battle is also to raise awareness for Neuroblastoma.

"We're a working-class family and the people who have helped are just normal people," Nicola added. "It's really amazing.

"But you shouldn't have to raise huge amounts of money to save your child's life."

You can donate to crowdfunding [here](#).