

Ellen DeGeneres Gives South Florida Cancer Survivor the Surprise of a Lifetime

As a 12-year-old cancer survivor, Veronica Avila has already fought more than her share of difficult battles. But it was a visit to Los Angeles earlier this year that left the seventh-grader from Coconut Creek nearly speechless.



From left, Veronica Avila with Ellen DeGeneres.

It was then that Veronica got to meet one of her favorite performers – talk show host Ellen DeGeneres – during a live taping of her national show. In a surprise move, DeGeneres brought Veronica onstage to help celebrate her courageous fight against cancer.

“I was in shock when she told me to come down,” said Veronica. “I literally started crying because she is my idol. It was an honor meeting her because she is an inspiration to a lot of people.”

No one understands that better than Veronica, who during many months of treatment for a rare bone cancer watched *The Ellen*

DeGeneres Show nearly every day for a source of humor and encouragement.

Her diagnosis of osteosarcoma came when she was just six years old, after complaining of leg pain while playing soccer. The disease – a primary cancer of the bone that affects children and young adults – is extremely rare, representing only two percent of pediatric sarcomas.

The Avila family was referred to Sheila Ann Conway, M.D., a fellowship-trained orthopaedic oncologist at Sylvester Comprehensive Cancer Center at the University of Miami Miller School of Medicine.

After aggressive chemotherapy, Conway, who has a specialized fellowship in sarcomas and other tumors of bone and soft tissue, turned to state-of-the-art technology. After removing the affected region of bone in Veronica's leg, which involved the growth plate, she implanted a special expandable prosthesis to accommodate anticipated growth and to ensure Veronica's leg remains the same length.

"Veronica has recovered extremely well from the surgery with excellent function and comes into the office regularly for non-invasive lengthening, with a small mobile magnet-based device, and cancer surveillance studies," said Conway, associate professor, chief of the Orthopaedic Oncology Division in the Department of Orthopaedic Surgery, and program director for both the UM/Jackson Memorial Hospital Orthopaedic Surgery Residency Program and the Musculoskeletal Oncology Fellowship Program. "As a result, she has been able to have a childhood without a multitude of procedures, as was required with previous invasive, expandable techniques."

Now nearly five years after surgery, Veronica remains cancer free.

For her bravery, she was honored recently by the Fort Lauderdale-based Jessica June Children's Cancer Foundation, which had helped her family with financial aid to cover medical bills and groceries while she was in treatment. Veronica was named the honoree of the 6th Annual Fancy Jeans Party in April, and she sent Ellen a video asking her to be her "date" for the event.

Ellen sent back a handwritten note inviting Veronica to meet her in Los Angeles, along with VIP tickets to her show. One week later, Veronica and her family were on their way.

As an added surprise, Ellen gave Veronica an Apple laptop computer and \$10,000 to support her education. Veronica intends to use it to become a surgeon so she can help others in need.

"I want to be able to help other people, particularly kids who are going through what I went through," she said. "I want to make it easier for them to understand the entire process like Dr. Conway did for me."

The Orthopaedic Oncology Division provides fellowship-trained specialists in all subspecialties, as well as a multidisciplinary, comprehensive team of physicians dedicated to sarcoma care – including medical oncology, pathology, radiation oncology, musculoskeletal radiology, and specialized nurses, nurse practitioners and physician assistants.