

Education

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After tackling cancer with humor, Miami-Dade grad ready to take on Harvard

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After being diagnosed with cancer her junior year, doctors advised Angela Ortiz to take a year off from high school.

Instead, she juggled chemo and radiation with a full load of advanced courses and college classes, earning straight A's and a full-ride admission to Harvard. In between, she even found the time to write a funny guide for other teens with cancer.



Angela Ortiz (center), graduating at the Adrienne Arsht Center for the Performing Arts, beat cancer while juggling a full load of advanced placement and college courses at Miami-Dade's School for Advanced Studies. | PATRICK FARRELL MIAMI HERALD STAFF

"There was no way I was going to give up," Ortiz said.

On Thursday, Ortiz strolled across a stage at the Adrienne Arsht Center in downtown Miami to accept her high school diploma from the School for Advanced Studies. It was actually her second graduation: Through dual enrollment classes, she has already earned an associate's degree from Miami Dade College.

"Incredible, this girl," said her father, Juan Ortiz.

Not to mention inspiring. Just two weeks into her classes at SAS — a Miami-Dade County public school for juniors and seniors ranked as one of the most challenging in the country — it became obvious something was seriously wrong. The otherwise healthy teen, a black belt in martial arts, struggled to breathe.

She stuffed a backpack full of nothing but books and headed to the emergency room with her family. The diagnosis was frightening: Hodgkin's lymphoma, a cancer of the immune system. Tumors in her neck and chest left mere millimeters for air to pass through Ortiz's trachea. Her family couldn't bear to tell her that doctors recommended she stay out of school.

"She loves her studies so much that to tell her that she couldn't go to school would break her to pieces," Juan Ortiz said.

"School has always been my thing," Ortiz said. "I've been crazy about it."

Ortiz insisted her chemo appointments be made on Friday afternoons, after she was done with school, so she could have the whole weekend to recover. Still, she said, there were times radiation left her disoriented and sapped of energy. Often stuck at home or in hospital beds, Ortiz taught herself everything her peers were learning in class. She made a perfect score on her SAT reading test, as well as AP advanced literature and composition.

"She never missed a beat when it came to her academics," said Ortiz's English teacher, Adrienne Pedroso. "She never asked for accommodations. She never asked to be excused or forgiven from assignments or tests. She did all the same work the other students did."

Ortiz insisted on going back to school as soon as possible. She showed up with a bald head and a port in her chest — a device placed under the skin to make it easier to deliver medicine. Her friends carried her bookbag for her.

Ortiz's illness hit her family hard. Her 71-year-old father had a small stroke in the hospital shortly after learning his youngest child had cancer. But early on, Ortiz said she discovered it was easier to deal with her diagnosis if she could keep everyone laughing.

"I'm pretty sure that's what helped me get better so quickly," she said.

That insight prompted Ortiz to write a guide for teens like her, a pamphlet full of serious tips delivered with wit — to help make everything "suck less." The little blue 21-page booklet has a long title: *A Brief Guide to Adolescent Cancer: Written by an Adolescent Cancer Patient — Also known as: An Attempt to Get You to Laugh as You Sit Around Bored and Balding.*

One chapter is called "Humor: AKA your new best friend."

"There are going to be some really tension-filled moments. Some moments where you don't know whether to laugh or cry," she writes. "Well, if you don't particularly feel like waterworks at the moment, feel free to go for a joke."

In her pamphlet, Ortiz lists movie recommendations — mostly chick flicks. "I'm addicted to them. My apologies," she writes. There's also a chart to help patients remember all of the people streaming in and out of a hospital room and recommendations for where to buy stylish beanie-style hats to cover hairless heads.

Ortiz is working with the Sunshine Group, a nationwide nonprofit that helps children with cancer, to get the pamphlet into hospitals across the country.

"She was very touched by this whole world related to cancer. It's like this underground machinery we weren't aware of. There were all these people trying to help," said Ortiz's mom, Aurea Hurtado. "She was very impressed with that, so she said, 'Mom. I need to do something. I want to do something.'"

Ortiz's hair is growing back now. It's just below her ears and curlier than it was before it fell out. At her graduation on Thursday, she wore it loose with a teal dress and tan, low-slung heels.

Her family is now preparing for another big adjustment: Ortiz is heading to Boston. She has a full scholarship to attend Harvard. In a birthday note Ortiz recently wrote to her mother, she promised: "I will make you proud."

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