

# Unprotected People #70

## Hepatitis B

---

### We Called Him “A-Man”

*After 20-year-old Adrian Elkins' death from liver cancer in August 2003, his siblings established the Answer to Cancer Foundation. One of the foundation's goals is to educate the public about HBV screening and risk factors and about preventive measures for primary liver cancer.*

*As the foundation's website makes clear, Adrian and his family were blindsided by his disease: “Had [Adrian] known during his childhood that his ethnicity and underlying medical condition [HBV infection] increased his chance of developing liver cancer . . . he would have had regular liver screenings each year.”*

*“We Called Him ‘A-Man,’” which follows, is written by Adrian's sister Tara Elkins and appears on the Answer To Cancer Foundation's website. IAC is grateful to Ms. Elkins and the foundation for permission to reprint the article, on which the foundation holds the copyright.*

### We Called Him “A-Man”

*By Tara Elkins*

#### **Our new arrival**

When I was seven years old, my parents told me that they wanted to adopt another child to bring our family of five up to six. I didn't think much of it until we got the “official” call on Mother's Day 1983—an infant boy in India needed a family and he would soon come to ours. Suddenly I would no longer be the baby. My place in our family was threatened, and I wasn't so sure what to think about it.

We piled into our minivan and headed to the airport to greet our new arrival. As soon as Adrian came off the airplane, his big brown eyes peeking out from the wicker basket in which he was transported, I realized that this was a little girl's dream come true. I had a real live baby doll to hold and cuddle, to pamper and love. And so, it came to be, that I was a big sister.

Not many years later, my brother Miguel came to our family from Guatemala. “The boys” became our family's focus, but Adrian, still the baby of the family, remained everyone's (even Miguel's) pride and joy. From a young age, Adrian had a certain way about him. He exuded a calmness that, accompanied by an addictive smile, made you instantly fall in love with him, want to be his friend, and thoroughly enjoy his company. My siblings and I (including my older brother Chris, my younger brother Miguel, and my older sister Shannon) treated him as if he were our child—probably spoiling him even a bit too much.

#### **It's probably just appendicitis or something**

We watched him graduate from elementary school, cheered him on at track meets in middle and high school, and hugged him tightly when he walked the stage at his high school graduation. With apprehension and excitement, we sent him off to college, only occasionally lecturing him about his grades or his “open dorm room policy,” as only siblings can do. He, WE, made it through our first year and eagerly anticipated the next. Then his world, and ours, came crumbling down.

Adrian woke up on the first morning of his second year of college with a sharp pain in his side. He was short of breath. “Maybe I just need to lie down,” he thought, and took a short breather on his dorm room bed. But it didn't subside. He asked a friend of his to drive him to the emergency room just in case. My mom called me that day to tell me that Adrian, “A-Man” as we called him, was sick. “Maybe it's a gall bladder attack or appendicitis?” I thought. His overnight hospital visit turned into a several-day stay. They wanted to take some tests to rule a few things out. It's probably nothing serious, though [I thought].

*(continued on next page)*

I drove from my home in Seattle to see him when he came home from the hospital a few days later. I joked with him that he was a hypochondriac, and I asked him if I could have his stereo system if anything happened. We laughed that day. It was nothing serious—couldn't be. It's Adrian after all. He's led a gifted life.

### **But this doesn't happen to 19-year-olds!**

Just a few short days later, Adrian was diagnosed with hepatocellular carcinoma, primary liver cancer. My family knew nothing about this liver cancer—why should we? It just doesn't happen to 19-year-old kids. But it did. Adrian had a tumor the size of a football on his liver, and we needed to do something about it. This was not going to take our baby away from us. We dove head first into researching treatment, doctors, options, trials . . . everything we could to lead us to our next steps. My sister led the brigade, logging countless hours on the telephone and email. I scanned the Internet every day looking for articles and links and hoping that maybe I had missed something the day before. My brothers provided comic relief. And we all called Adrian at least once a day, usually twice. "How are you today?" we would ask. And he would always say, "Fine," even when he was not.

We know today that liver cancer is very difficult to treat because it is often detected at a late stage. Adrian knew that he was up for the battle of his life—and he knew what he was up against. He lived his last ten months to the fullest and did everything he could to fight the cancer. He traveled to Seattle on two occasions to stay with me, he visited my sister Shannon in New York for several weeks, and he went with my Dad and brother Chris to the Indy 500. He traveled to Houston on two occasions for treatment at MD Anderson Cancer Center. The trip was hard on him both mentally and physically, but he knew it was something he needed to do. He remained the Adrian that we knew—sometimes being the rock that we needed to get through this. I once asked him if he was scared. "Why should I be?" he asked me. "What happens, happens."

### **Answer to Cancer Race**

Of it all, his most unbelievable accomplishment was founding the Answer to Cancer Race. Adrian was

not a "watch from behind the scenes" type of person. Case in point: Once, in high school, he was to be awarded the Cross Country Runner of the Year award. The whole Elkins family piled into the high school gymnasium during a pep rally (in the middle of a weekday, [no less]) to see him receive his award—a surprise to him. When they announced his name, he didn't come to the podium. Turns out that he was too busy organizing the school's canned food drive. He didn't have time for a pep rally. He had other things to do. That was Adrian.

So when he got sick, Adrian decided he wanted to do something to raise money for liver cancer research and education. He said, "I don't want other people to go through what I have." He didn't feel well, but at least if he was sitting at home, he could get his laptop out and start putting together something meaningful. In June, he laid the groundwork for the Answer to Cancer Race (as a runner, it was the best way he could imagine to raise funds). When his body wouldn't allow him to get up and do the many things that needed to be done in preparation for the race, our family stepped in to keep the ball rolling. In six weeks' time, the first annual Answer to Cancer Race was held, on a balmy Sunday in August. More than 240 runners and walkers participated, and we raised nearly \$24,000. Adrian fired the starting gun.

I believe it was Adrian's will to see that race take place. We were all there that day—our family, friends, and his teammates and classmates. He got to see his goal become a reality and see everyone he loved. Many people don't experience that in their lifetime. Only eight days later he passed away.

### **Carrying on Adrian's mission**

To say that my family and I miss Adrian is an understatement. To put into words what he meant to our family is impossible. To think that he won't be at the other end of my phone call is unbearable. But with heavy hearts, we have chosen to continue his mission. With his spirit guiding us every step of the way, we have continued on with the Answer to

*(continued on next page)*

Cancer Race, now the Answer to Cancer Foundation. We have buried ourselves in Adrian's dream of not wanting other people to go through what he has. If we didn't have this, we would be lost. This is now the light that guides us through the darkness of this horrible disease.

Yes, my brothers and sisters still cry when we think of him, but we also sometimes smile. We even joke about him—as only siblings can do. That's what he would want us to do.

*To learn more about the Answer to Cancer Foundation started by Adrian's siblings, go to:  
[www.answer-to-cancer.org](http://www.answer-to-cancer.org) | 2/9/04*