

# CONQUER TOGETHER

*“Friends are those who nourish the spirit.”*

- Author Unknown

**N**ine-year-old Mark Ciccarelli pasted a smile on his face and pretended that everything was fine so his family and friends wouldn't worry about him. But no child with cancer should have to carry that burden.

Later, when Mark met a lung cancer survivor, he realized how helpful it was to connect with someone with a similar experience.

“It gives you a whole lot more strength to talk to someone who understands what you're going through firsthand,” says Mark.

As a result, Mark created an online system that allows cancer survivors, family members and caregivers from around the world to connect with one another and share experiences, hope and encouragement.

## **Pretending**

Mark was diagnosed with Hodgkin's disease at age nine – just as he was getting ready to enter the fourth grade. His family tried their best to hide their distress. And Mark tried his best to pretend it wasn't that bad. “I remember walking over to the mirror and feeling awful. I forced myself to smile and I'd project myself into the future – to when I didn't have cancer anymore.”

Mark missed a lot of school that year but participated in as many activities as possible. There were times when he'd go outside and play kick ball with his medicine in a fanny pack hooked up to a catheter in his chest – partly to feel like a normal kid again and partly to reassure his family and friends that he was all right.

The guidance counselor at the elementary school provided Mark's parents with phone numbers of other families in similar situations. “But it's tough to call a random family up to ask about their experiences,” says Mark. “It's a very sensitive topic and it's difficult to judge how they may react.”

Mark was on chemotherapy for almost a year and then finished off with radiation. He had follow-up visits every three months, then six months, and then once a year. By age 15, cancer appointments were a thing of the past.