Samantha Sumerlin underwent surgery to remove a cancerous brain tumor when she was not quite 2 years old. A healthy 9-year-old today, she loves to color and recently won a poster contest for Doctor's Day.

COPING WITH CANCER
9-year-old Samantha Sumerlin survives brain tumor

By LAURIE SMITH ANDERSON
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Nine-year-old Samantha Sumerlin was clowning around with two friends the other day.

"I was born beautiful," the first girl said.

"I was born with a big mouth," the second admitted.

"I was born with a brain tumor," Samantha said. Samantha was diagnosed with medulloblastoma (a malignant brain tumor) on Feb. 14, 1985 — just two weeks before her second birthday.

The child had been throwing up and experiencing bad headaches for weeks; she had also become extremely lethargic — almost in a semi-coma state, recalls her mother, Debbie Sumerlin. A CT scan revealed the presence of the tumor and the Sumerlins immediately went to M.D. Anderson Hospital in Houston.

After four days of tests, Samantha was taken into surgery. The doctors were not optimistic. There was a good chance she might not survive the operation and, if she did, her condition might still be grim. But there was no real choice.

"The tumor was contained in a sac and we were able to lift it off the brain stem," the doctor told the Sumerlins.

However, three days later, while still in intensive care, Samantha became lethargic again. A blood clot had taken the place of the tumor and was again putting pressure on the brain. Back in surgery, the clot was successfully removed.

When the symptoms recurred a third time, doctors told the Sumerlins that the spinal fluid was not flowing properly and Samantha had become hydrocephalic, meaning that excess spinal fluid was accumulating in her head.
was accumulating in her brain. Another surgery was required to insert a shunt—a device to drain the fluid into the abdomen.

Finally, the shunt worked. Samantha was in remission and back on track, though her equilibrium had been disturbed and she had to learn to walk again. Residual nerve damage had also resulted in some facial paralysis and cross-eyed vision although those problems have also been corrected.

There have been incidences of shunt malfunction where Samantha had to go back into surgery for revisions. The Sumerlins keep a packed suitcase in the house. For their first emergency trip to Houston, Debbie Sumerlin recalls that she packed her husband seven shirts and no pants; she didn’t pack anything for herself.

The Sumerlins go back to M.D. Anderson for periodic checkups to confirm that the cancer has not returned and, for that, they are grateful.

Nine years old and enrolled in third grade at Cornerstone Academy, Samantha loves to draw, dance and cheer. She recently won a Doctor’s Day art contest for a picture she drew of Moser, complete with curly hair, beard and white coat, about to send her for an MRI (magnetic resonance imaging).

Moser calls Samantha “Sammie,” The Sumerlins call him “Moses.”

Samantha is straightforward about her illness. When she describes the role her doctor plays in her award-winning drawing, she says simply, “He does surgeries to keep me alive.”

A healthy looking child with a sturdy build and shiny, dark hair, Samantha has hopes, fears, likes and dislikes like other children. She loves the movie “The Little Mermaid,” which she says she has watched “250 times.” She collects bears; in fact, gift bears are displayed throughout the house and Samantha plays school with her favorite bears.

She wants to be a teacher, “but I only want to teach good kids in first grade.” And she would also like to be a veterinarian because she likes cats.

She likes M.D. Anderson Hospital, but hates it when she loses her hair because she’s afraid of being teased.

Debbie Sumerlin, a third-grade teacher, says her daughter has behaved very well through all of her treatments and surgeries and that their family has become stronger.

“Some people don’t know what to say to us or how to treat Samantha, but the word ‘cancer’ is not so bad. We’ve lived through it . . . and we’ve learned not to take anything for granted.”