When Donovan Cook was diagnosed with metastatic neuroblastoma two weeks after his fourth birthday, doctors told his parents they didn't expect him to live through the week. When the highly malignant cancer of the nervous system came back a second time in October 1990, the physicians were even less optimistic. Chances of survival with advanced widespread neuroblastoma are small. Defying the odds not once, but twice, Donovan is now in remission and back in school as a fourth-grader at St. Thomas More School.

Donovan had few symptoms when he was first diagnosed with neuroblastoma, the second most common children's cancer, his parents, Fran and Wayne Cook, recall. "He complained of pains in his leg, so I took him in and his blood tests were abnormal, leading the doctors to suspect cancer," Fran Cook says. "We went straight to Ochsner's in New Orleans and the diagnosis was confirmed... I felt like my world was falling apart."

Donovan, a lanky boy with dark, curly hair and big eyes, says he doesn't remember much of his early treatment, although he does recall being stuck a lot as he underwent chemotherapy, following surgery to remove two tumors near his right kidney.

"He never argued or complained or refused to go through a treatment and he only cried once — when they took him from us for blood work," Fran Cook says. Following completion of treatment, Donovan and his family resumed a normal life. He went to school and grew like any other child, returning to Ochsner's for periodic checkups. In his spare time, he enjoyed riding his bike, playing G.I. Joe and watching TV.

On Oct. 25, 1990, a routine exam revealed the cancer had returned. This time, surgeons went in and were unable to remove the tumor because it was intertwined with blood vessels around his kidneys. A first round of chemotherapy didn't work, either. The doctors became more aggressive in Donovan's treatment regimen, switching to a stronger drug in chemotherapy and administering daily doses of radiation for one month. Back in surgery, they were surprised...
to find that the tumor had shrunk significantly and they were able to successfully remove most of it. While still in surgery, Donovan was administered inter-operative radiation therapy directly to the site of the tumor. The boy lost his hair three times during treatment and had to continue his education at home. His mother quit her job, providing childcare for infants in her home, and devoted her attention to his care.

However, Donovan’s third-grade class did not forget him and when they sent him a videotape of their school activities, he responded by sending them a tape of one of his chemotherapy sessions. During a brief visit to class one day, he raised his shirt and showed his classmates where he had been marked for radiation therapy.

His teacher, Jeri Gremillion, says she was impressed with how matter-of-fact Donovan was about his treatment and how well he kept up with his schoolwork at home.

“And the kids were great,” Gremillion said. “They never laughed at him when he lost his hair or excluded him. They just treated him like one of the gang. At Christmas, we sent him a large jar of pickles because that was one of the few things he enjoyed when the therapy messed up his taste buds.”

Now in remission a second time and back in school full time, the 10-year-old continues to surprise everyone.

“They say they can’t give us a prognosis,” Wayne Cook says. “He beat the odds by going into remission the first time; the second remission was almost unheard of.”

While Donovan’s illness has been hard on the family, it has also drawn them closer together and deepened their faith in God, Fran Cook says.

“Our oldest daughter, Monica, who’s 14, took it really hard the first time. This time, it’s been a little easier for her because she knew what to expect. But, our youngest daughter, Mandi, who’s 9, has been more disturbed this time. She was just a baby the first time around. But she’s real close to her brother.”

Coping with Donovan’s cancer has been a big financial drain on the family’s resources, the Cooks say. While their insurance covers the bulk of Donovan’s medical costs, the out-of-pocket expenses have been great. Two benefits have been held in Donovan’s name to defray some of the costs and a “Donovan Cook Fund” has been established at Premier Bank to accept donations.

Meanwhile, the Cooks are optimistic that Donovan will continue to beat the odds.