

Swimming Through Cancer

Marri Kutz

It's Sunday afternoon. I'm one of the top eight swimmers in the 200 yard backstroke in the finals at the regional championships. I feel butterflies in my stomach. I'm tired after three long days of competition. I force negative thoughts out of my head, "It's only a 200 back. I can do this. I've done this for years."

It's November 6, 2012. My mind is foggy as we walk out of the clinic. My mom's face is empty. "Mom," I ask cautiously, "what does lymphoma mean?" I search her eyes for an answer. All I see are her tears. "It's a type of cancer," she chokes out. We race to Children's Hospital.

My stomach is tied in knots as the official blows his whistle. The eight of us plunge into the water. Bubbles float up and tickle my feet as I take my ready position. "Take your mark." BEEEEEEEEEP! I launch off the block. I want to beat my time from earlier today, so I give it my all.

In round one of chemotherapy, I have no idea what to expect. When the drugs kick in, my legs ache, my stomach clenches, and my mouth tastes like saline. I feel weak, but I try to be strong and pretend that it doesn't hurt. Towards the end of the round, still trying to be confident, I drag myself into the shower, scrub shampoo through my hair, and notice that huge clumps of hair come out. Tears roll down my cheeks.

I flip turn into the second 50 yards of my race. My legs burn, but I push myself to stay with the swimmer next to me. I'm doing well because my coach happily cheers. Inside though, I feel pain and anxiety. I wish racing was easy, but it isn't.

I lay in bed watching TV in the second round of chemotherapy. I don't recognize the characters. I ask my mom who they are. She laughs, thinking it's a joke. As soon as she realizes that I'm serious, her face becomes blank. Chemotherapy is brutal. The longer treatment goes, the harder it is.

The third 50 yards are the hardest because I want to be done, but I'm not. I'm fatigued after holding a strong pace. My breath gets shorter. My legs are numb. My coach's cheer sounds more concerned. Deep down, I still want it. As the third 50 goes on, I see splashes pass me in the neighboring lane. I fall behind and panic.

I lay uncomfortable in my hospital bed during the third round. An extra day in the hospital makes me anxious. I want to go home. My swim team friends visit after practice. They walk into my hospital room, and I instantly smell chlorine. The scent relaxes me and my anxiety goes away. I

miss them when they leave, but mostly I miss the smell of chlorine.

I make my final push of the race. my body aches and feels like collapsing. I am out of breath. I give everything left and fling myself into the wall. I finally finished the race.

I dread the last round of chemotherapy. As I sit in the chair, I hear the machine make it's awful noise that is now a joyous beep, marking the end of treatment. I've completed chemotherapy.

I did not win or get a bet time in my 200 backstroke that day, but I did beat cancer and am now cancer free. I learned that victories come from unexcited places. I am victorious. I am courageous because I faced the challenges of cancer. I am stronger and more confident than I was because I know what it mens to work my hardest. I am determined to give one-hundred percent, no matter the results. I am Marri.

The Nuances

Krystal Graylin

Walking past a girl wearing artificial berry lotion, a shudder involuntary passes through me. The scent drags me back to an old but vivid memory.

Lying on the hospital table, a nurse asks me what flavor "mask" I would prefer. I tell her it doesn't matter. A flexible rubber mask covers my mouth. The air is tinted strawberry.

A suffocating, sickly sweet strawberry. One that drags the consciousness out of me.

I am at a volleyball game in fourth grade. The after game snack is packaged cheese and crackers, completed by a red plastic stick. I cringe and refuse to touch it. The smell makes me gag. The vending machines at the hospital were filled with the poison. I ate them almost everyday. I used to find spreading the artificial cheese on crackers and making "sandwiches" amusing. Now, the thought of the red stick makes me uneasy.

The teacher is giving out scented stickers for coming up to the board, and answering a question. My eyes light up with glee, pure and innocent joy. My hand immediately shoots up, and I almost sprint to the board. After completing the problem, I collect my sticker with delight. After blood draws at the hospital, they would always give me strips of stickers; I have a shelf of binders filled.

"You give me cancer" and "That is such cancer" are common insults among teens. It's never been directed towards me, but whenever I hear the phrase, it makes me shudder inside. A silent, heated shudder, as I remember what cancer was really like. It is not an insult; it is not an adjective. It is a disease caused by uncontrolled cell division. "Cancer" is ingrained in the cross-fire of insults, but few realizes the weight of the word.

I was given two scars in exchange for my freedom. One beneath my right collar bone, the other below my belly button. I am wearing a cardigan over a camisole, and my "survivor" necklace. The scar peeks over the top, but I don't notice anymore. It is just as permanent as the green veins flowing beneath my skin. But, the girl next to me notices and points at my chest, "what's that from?", she inquires. I shift my feet in the other direction, ever so slightly. My neck tenses, and gaze adverts. I quietly reply that the necklace says "survivor", I got it from a Relay for Life event, but I don't go into further detail. The conversation dies. Was she looking at my scar or necklace? I doubt she understands what "survivor" means to me. I stretch up the top of the camisole to cover the scar. I use my cardigan to blanket myself from the seemingly innocent questions; burying the necklace beneath my hair.

Cancer hasn't just left me with dark memories of chemo, it's mark is exposed in the mundane everyday. Though, not as you might expect.

On most days, I've forgotten that I'm a cancer survivor. But alas, it's effect is engraved in me, revealing itself in the subtlest of ways. I am cancer free, but now the devil is in the details. Since then, almost everything has changed, yet remnants of my shadowed childhood return to haunt me.

The Turning Point

Lauren Goodrich

I was one of the lucky ones: a suburban white girl with upper-middle class parents who have supported my every dream. I attended a private catholic school and was starting on the varsity volleyball team. I have loved horses since my first meeting with them in 2010 at Madison Grove Farm in Fall City. Madison Grove Farm (MGF) is a non-profit farm that rescues and rehabilitates horses and then connects the horses with disadvantaged children. I did everything at MGF including cleaning stalls, organizing several of their annual auctions, and giving pony rides. My passion was clearly for horses and I volunteered over 5000 hours a year. Months of searching led me to my current horse Rockos. He was a challenging project, but we had already taught each other so much. Everything seemed to be going my way.

It was July 30, 2013, and I had just finished my morning workout preparing us for the upcoming volleyball season; honestly, I only played for the exercise. I arrived early for a routine doctor's appointment in an office just down the street. As I sat there in the waiting room chair, I sucked in my stomach and tried to sit up taller to avoid a bulge of fat from rolling over the top of my jeans. Once in the room, I sat down on the exam table, careful not to rip the strip of paper covering it. We went through the exam as usual, doing a head-to-toe systems check of eyes, ears, nose, throat, heart, lungs, gut... the list goes on. Everything came back normal. Why wouldn't it? The doctor asked if I had any questions or concerns before I left, and I had nothing to say other than how I felt pretty bloated. It seemed like nothing, but she palpated my stomach to be sure. I laid there embarrassed. What used to be a flat firm stomach now looked like I just had eaten my entire pantry. My doctor got a dazed look on her face and left the room. Confused, I laid there looking around. As I was about to get up, she returned with another older looking woman, apparently another doctor. They both stood above me, taking turns pressing on my stomach and talking in a medical language I couldn't even pretend to understand.

Numerous tests followed that day. I wasn't allowed to eat all day before my appointments and my stomach seemed to be gurgling curse words at me. Then I would have to lay in a tube for what felt like forever, forced to dwell on my worried thoughts. The results showed that what I thought was bad eating habits was a tumor growing on my right ovary. That was unexpected to say the least. My biggest concern wasn't about life or death; it was when I would be able to work with my horse again. A surgery like that meant two days in the hospital for recovery and six weeks of no physical activity, meaning no horses. The farm was the only place I could go to distract myself. Horses are a hundred times more sensitive than humans and I could tell they felt the pain in my heart. I was on a journey of healing along with these previously abused rescue horses.

A week later, my ovary was removed along with the five pound tumor. The results of the pathology test showed that the tumor was both solid and fluid — called a mixed germ cell tumor in medical terms. Certain parts were cancerous. The chances of it returning were 50/50, and

those seemed like pretty good odds to me. Why worry about it when theres nothing I could do? So I stuffed those emotions deep down and continued on with my life.

Who cared about the thirteen inch scar it would leave down the middle of my stomach? Actually, I thought it looked pretty cool. The time I spent away from Rockos only made me realize how important that aspect of my life was. He always knew how to cheer me up. Six weeks on the couch can really drive a person crazy, I couldn't wait to be a healthy fifteen-year-old girl again. I got butterflies the first day I was allowed to go back to the farm. As I walked out to the pasture and called Rockos' name he ran to me as if saying, "Mom where have you been all this time I missed you so much!". I promised myself I would never leave again. Eventually, the one hour-long supervised visits to the farm turned into two, then three, until I could be left alone. There was no longer a concern that I would bust a stitch and be sent back to the hospital. My life was back to normal.

Going back to school was the last thing I wanted to do but I had signed up for all advanced courses and missing class was not an option. The school held an assembly to explain my situation so there would be no hushed rumors going around. Afterwards, they handed out forest green 'Team Lauren' Livestrong bracelets to each student. Apparently that was a close enough color to represent teal ovarian cancer. It was unnerving seeing my name on everyone's wrists as I sat in class. I felt like I had already died and this was their way of honoring me. Each moment there was a constant reminder of how much my life had been circling the drain.

For the rest of the season I started every volleyball game. We even made it to state that year, and everyone was ready to win. Maybe it was good I was already in a fighting mindset at the time because my weekly blood test came back elevated. My heart sank, but maybe it was just a mistake, the CT scan could still come back clear. When the doctor called to inform us that there was a new golf ball sized tumor growing in my abdominal wall, all those emotions I had previously ignored came rushing back. I cried and my parents held me tight, which only made the tears fall faster. How awful it must have felt to know you could lose your only child to an incurable disease, and all the love and time spent raising them to be strong and confident would mean nothing if they were gone.

Luckily, there was a treatment plan, with a fairly good survival rate. Starting November 18, 2013, my life revolved around the hospital . My plan included another surgery to remove the new tumor and three rounds of chemotherapy. I would spend five straight days in the hospital, then go in once a week for two weeks, and repeat. The pain, fatigue, and discomfort consumed my every thought. Cotton mouth was a side effect of the drugs and my throat was always dry no matter what I tried. Each time the nurse came in to administer the chemotherapy drugs they had to completely suit up in a gown, gloves, mask, and goggles. They couldn't even touch it, and yet these toxins were being pumped through every vein in my body. I still can't smell hospital food without gagging.

Journal entry 12/2/13: No visitors. Second day at the hospital and already wanting to go home. I wish I could go outside and be with Rockos; that's where I belong. Right now I just feel nauseous but hungry. Everything I eat tastes bad so I have to constantly brush my teeth. I'm

lucky I haven't thrown up yet but its bound to happen soon. Needles don't bother me anymore, but sometimes it's hard for the nurse to find a good vein because it's so scarred already. I hate always having to worry about something going wrong. This shouldn't be happening to me.

It was possible that I wasn't going to lose my hair. Just as I thought I would be lucky enough to keep my long gorgeous hair, my scalp started to itch. As I ran my fingers through, strands would fall to the ground accompanied with a tear. To avoid shedding everywhere I had to put it all in a braid. The next day my mom brought over the clippers and we shaved it down to a buzz cut. Each day more and more hair came loose. Eventually, I laid strips of duct tape down my head and pulled out what was remaining. I finally looked how I felt: sick. With my new pale bald head, I was basically the poster child for NOFA (no one fights alone) at school. I remember walking down the halls repeatedly telling myself, *you look fine no one cares just keep your head high*. It was a daily struggle to stop caring about what everyone else thought. I had already missed months of class and had a boatload of work to catch up on. Some teachers spited the fact that they had to deal with my special situation and made my life a living hell. Students told me they were praying for me, an easy way to feel like you're helping without actually doing anything. Though they said I was never fighting alone, that is exactly what I had to do.

I don't know how I got through it all: the hours spent waiting, the number of needles stuck into my arms, and the "Get Well" letters I received from students who had never said a word to me. People love to have a cause to support so that others can see their sensitive and caring side. In all honesty, if I would have died, they would have forgotten within the week. Dying can really show you a side of humanity you wish you hadn't experienced. I came away more aware of the world than I should be at this age.

December 11, 2015, I went in for my third surgery to remove yet another tumor growing in my abdomen. Death was testing my patience for this felt like more of an inconvenience and distraction from my work than anything. The surgeon was able to do the operation laparoscopically and the biopsy revealed that the tumor was benign, all good news. The next week I spent confined to the couch drove me crazy once again. I was so happy to finally be cleared to ride again that I promptly went to the barn and jumped on my horse in the field. We had only gone a few steps before he spooked, took off to the left, and I fell to the ground on the right. But it felt good to be covered in dirt and bruises again. I hope to live the rest of my life this fearless.

Though I may sound like a cynic at times, I still made many positive changes in my life as a result. I learned to stop doing the things that don't make me happy and focus on my passion for horses. Volleyball and other clubs I had joined to build my resume were cut out of my schedule. Every available second of my day is spent at the barn, and I am grateful to have this motivation and knowledge of what I want. My horse has healed me in ways that medicine couldn't, and I owe him everything.

150,000 Miles

Cassie Andresen

My car is a petite, silver Honda Accord with just over 150,000 miles on it. These many miles were accumulated over the course of seven years of love, dedication, faith, and heartbreak, and seven years that I would not change one second of.

My grandmother's car was the perfect fit for her, a small and persistent car for a small and persistent woman. She stood a total of four feet and ten inches tall, and had flowing golden hair all throughout her fifties, never graying. She was energetic but warm, outgoing but compassionate, and my best friend but nearly my mother. I was seven years old when my younger sister began preschool, leaving my parents' working hours too hectic to drive either of us to or from school, and our house too far away for a bus to stop by. My mother's mother, my Grandma Shirley, took it upon herself to discontinue her job in order to care for us all throughout the week while my parents continued their jobs. I had a second mother, one that woke me up in the morning for school and made me breakfast every morning, one that waited an extra twenty minutes in the school parking lot so that I could be the first picked up, and one who kissed my cheek goodbye every day until it became the most normal thing in the world. Every Sunday she drove from Westport to Little Rock, about a 90 minute drive, to my house, then returned every Friday afternoon to her little beach house for the weekend.

Grandma Shirley's hair never truly grayed, and I always remember it so beautiful and blonde, but one day I recall her cutting it very short and I couldn't imagine why. She was suddenly at my home much less, and my mother was crying much more, and still my young mind didn't understand why. I decided to ask, to which my mother responded with salty lips and red eyes. She described to me that cancer was a disease that many people get, including my Grandma Shirley, and that she would begin to appear very tired and her hair would fall out. Then she hugged me, and told me to love my grandmother with all of my heart, but it was much later until I finally understood the severity behind those words.

The following day, I noticed that Grandma Shirley's hair was long once more, and a different shade of blonde than it used to be. She laughed when I asked her about it and told me that she didn't love the wig that much, so she instead wrapped a scarf around her head. Her eyelashes were gone, and her skin was much paler than it used to be, but her lack of energy was never apparent because the energy in her voice was always so illuminated. I decided to ask her why the cancer made her hair fall out, and she explained to me that the cancer she obtained was called ovarian cancer, which affected many people. She described a "treatment" called chemotherapy, in which her body was given toxic chemicals in order to kill cancerous tissue, but that these toxins also destroyed other cells, such as those that allow hair to live and grow. The next day my

grandmother decided to take my sister and I wig shopping with her, so that we could relay input on her new hairstyle. For some reason, we all decided accordingly on the wig that most closely represented her previous hair, the golden hair that flowed and framed her tiny face. Sadly, that replica could never do hers justice.

Every morning we continued our routine, Grandma Shirley driving us to school in her little silver Honda that smelled of her laundry detergent because she kept her clothes in her car so often. I loved that car: the size, the smell, the color, and the seats; everything about it seemed to resemble my grandmother. From the tiny Hawaiian flowered necklace that she kept in the glove box to the Hawaiian flowered tattoo on her foot, she embodied that car, and I was content to sit in it every day and count the minutes on her clock until school or to listen to her sixties' music. Some days I could forget all about her thinning frame and her rapid hair loss. It was as if this ferocious parasite I envisioned was simply a phase that would pass. It broke my heart that it never did.

This energetic, spunky woman never lost her light, and after years of different therapies was forced to discontinue the treatment, after her body had rejected each type. However, living a short time to its most, she believed, was better than living longer but without excitement. I recall the day when her hair began to grow long enough to curl once again, and it was as if things were easy again, her energy restored and her bouncy exterior regained along with the lively personality. We traveled for her, we danced for her, and we experienced life with her, living that last year and a half with vigor and expression. She always used to tell me she loved my voice and asked me to sing for her, but I was too embarrassed, even by the time I reached my teenage years. But we would sing together often, and she would suddenly stop just before a long note so that she could hear me sing it loudly and alone, to which we would both laugh together at her trickery.

That Christmas, Grandma Shirley was too weak to drive to our house for Christmas Eve, so we brought all the decorations and festivities into her little beach home in Westport. I recall holding her hand the next morning and realizing how small and pale it had become, so I brought over a blanket and we spent the morning laughing, eating, and reading together. Her appetite was gone, but she still smiled when she ate the cookie I had frosted her name onto.

On April 19, 2011, Grandma Shirley passed away in her own bed, surrounded by her daughters and my father. I, being thirteen years old, went to school that day after spending the night at a friend's house. I arrived that morning and fifteen minutes into first period, I received a note to come to the office. When I found my mother sitting in that chair, her eyes more wet and swollen than I'd ever seen, I could do nothing but collapse as well.

The pain that accompanies the loss of a person is not repairable. With the word "death" comes a variation of heartbreak that doesn't leave a crack, but rather a hole, by which no bandage may ever truly heal once more. If a heart is a body, a human with arms and legs and fingers and toes, the loss of a loved one is the equivalent of losing one of those pieces. The most painful part is the

phantom limb that follows, when the feeling remains but the person does not. The hole never closes and the piece never returns, but the love stays. The love never fades.

At Grandma Shirley's celebration of life, I stood up in front of all of her loved ones and sang the song I had practiced over and over and sometimes sang with her, "Hallelujah." I could never recall a day in my life that I cried harder.

That day, we returned home and my mother put a set of keys in my hand, keys that I recognized because strung upon the loop was a flip-flop keychain. She told me that my grandmother had left me her car, that when I reached fifteen, I could begin learning to drive it and that despite the many miles driven, nearly 150,000, the car was in beautiful condition and could last me years upon years.

My heart was too overwhelmed to register what this meant until I returned home from my first day back at school. Now, my mother rearranged her work schedule in order to drop me off in the mornings, and I rode home with a friend or stayed after for school sports until I was able to be picked up. That day, I arrived at my home and opened the front door to an empty house. My mother walked in after me, sitting down upon the couch to rest, but I strode to the kitchen drawer and pulled out a set of keys and went back outside. Fumbling because I had never before used a car key, I unlocked the silver Honda, sat down in the seat still set for a woman who stood four feet and ten inches tall, and cried.

For my sixteenth birthday, I received two gifts that I use every day. One was from my Grandma Shirley, who gave me her petite, bright car that she sits in with me everyday I drive to school. The other was from my mother, and it was a bumper sticker that read "Never drive faster than your angel can fly." My grandmother never chose to drive fast or far, but she drove purposefully, nearly 150,000 miles that cancer could never slow.

A Cancer Free World

Elizabeth Han

The harsh Las Vegas summer sun radiated onto the black crumbs of turf, making the field feel like a giant burning oven. The dry heat was inescapable, relentlessly sucking all remaining energy and hope from my teammates. I shielded my eyes from the blinding glare as I watched my team get scored on goal after goal by the Utah state champions. Unable to even kick a ball, I was rendered useless to my team. All I could do was sit and ice the torn ligament in my ankle. An overwhelming sense of powerlessness and frustration welled up inside of me. I felt utterly useless, helplessly watching my team fight a losing battle. Watching my mom battle a brain tumor feels exactly like that.

My mom was diagnosed eighteen years ago, before I was even born. The tumor is located in the brainstem, meaning surgery would be an extremely difficult, if not impossible task. The tumor affects the left side of her brain, which means the right side of her body does not function as it should. I have never seen her run, or even walk without a severe limp. I have seen her body give out from under her, causing her to fall countless times. Some falls are minor, some are terrifying. In the moments after her falls, she takes time to recuperate mentally and physically. In those times I feel completely helpless. Unable to understand the pain she experiences, I am forced to sit and watch as she struggles alone.

My mom has reached the point where she is too weak to even open her fingers to grab something. But what she lacks in physical strength, she more than makes up for, mentally and spiritually. I have witnessed how even in the darkest of situations, she continues to find the strength to laugh and make others around her smile.

My mom has played an immense role in how I have developed into who I am today, and the values I hold most important. When I see my mom's refusal to let her tumor get the better of her, I see firsthand what strength and perseverance looks like. The way she has battled her brain tumor has inspired me to live with the same determination she shows every day. She has taught me how to love people wholeheartedly and unconditionally, to see the best in every situation, and most importantly, to never give up. Through this difficult journey, my sense of family importance has also been magnified, and I realize how privileged I am to have a strong and positive family behind me. My determination to achieve my goals is one of the most important values I have learned from my mom. She has taught me to never give up on things I believe in, no matter what obstacles may be in my way, and to always strive for the best. These values could not have been so powerfully and permanently instilled in me, had I not experienced this.

Whether she is endlessly nagging me to become a doctor, or giving me tips on how to improve in soccer, my mom always pushes me to put forth my best self. Her disability has proved to be a

difficult road to travel, but it has helped me become the resilient, determined, driven person that I am today. My life is better with my mom in it, cheering me on in everything I do. She is a constant reminder of all the things I can accomplish, thanks to the strength she has displayed everyday for the last seventeen years of my life.

This is the essay I used to apply to colleges. Because of the word limit, I was only able to scratch the surface of my experience with my mom's cancer. Now I have the opportunity to delve a little deeper and actually share my thoughts and emotions.

I've never talked to anyone about how growing up with my mom's disability has affected me, so I've had a lot of time to reflect on it independently. I'm not sure what my life would look like without my mom's tumor. Sometimes I think about all the things my family could do if she was healthy. We could go on hikes or take long walks around the neighborhood. We could go to the airport without seeing the tired look on my mom's face every time she has to get out of her wheelchair to walk through the metal detector. We could walk up the five steps to another floor without having to search every corner for an elevator. Without the tumor, my mom wouldn't have to wake up with a pounding headache every morning. Without the tumor, I wouldn't have to wake up from horrific dreams where my subconscious imagines my mom dying.

I dream of a world where my mom is just like any other mom. But the thing is, I wouldn't want to live in that world. It's a weird thing, crediting cancer with how your life has turned out for the better. There is no doubt that cancer sucks, and I wouldn't wish it upon anyone. But my mom's tumor has somehow worked its way into the relationships of my family and strengthened them. A world without my mom's tumor is a world deprived of the way my family and I have grown, both individually and collectively. Without her tumor, I don't think I would know how to love my mom in the way that I do now, or love my dad so much for sticking by her side all these years.

Often times I sit down next to my mom and massage her. I start with her fingers, which have a tendency to curl in, and I stretch them out, extending them as far as possible. Then I work on finger strength, telling her to squeeze my hand as hard as possible. Next I move to her arm. Normally she can't lift her arm past chin level because her shoulder just won't allow it, and her muscles aren't strong enough to lift it. I stretch her arm out, and reach it as high up as possible. Finally I move to her feet. Her toes curl under her, which makes it very easy to trip and fall. I try to stretch them out and make them as straight as possible. Just a few months ago, I was able to lift my mom's arm vertically into the air. My mom and I were both amazed, remembering how high her arm could go before. These little victories in my mom's mobility are inexplicable. For me to be able to help her in such a huge way is beyond gratifying. My mom can now lift her arm up vertically on her own, and her grip strength is slightly improving. Working on my mom's failing body has inspired me to explore the field of medicine. My experience with her has sparked an interest in physical therapy. Being able to help others in the same way I can help my mom seems like an incredibly gratifying profession.

Cancer has had a complex presence in my life from the day I was born. I don't know a life without it. Do I wish my mom had never gotten cancer? Well, yes and no. Yes, because if given the chance, I would never want my mom to ever have to experience this pain again. But without cancer, I don't know what my family would look like. My dad has told me that before her tumor, my mom didn't laugh as much, and that she didn't have as great a sense of humor, and wasn't as goofy. My mom as I know her today, is all those things. She's the funniest, strongest, happiest person I know. I would never trade my mom, as the person she is today, for anything.

Cancer sucks. For everyone that has ever been affected by it. But I admire my mom because of her ability to turn her cancer into something more positive, and not give into the many negatives. I love my family for not letting cancer be a reason to not enjoy life everyday. Yes, there are hard days, incredibly hard days. But the good days with my mom more than make up for those hard days.

Friday the 13th

Rachel Bridges

In the 4th grade, all I thought about was getting older. I worked hard to please teachers, and to form bonds with friends that would carry through to middle school and beyond. I used to be the kind of the kid who would talk to the para-educators during recess, and would look forward to indoor recess days, because I had the opportunity to stay inside, and go to the “book nook”, instead of being surrounded by yelling kids running amuck. As I grew, this faded away as I found my niche. In 3rd grade, I began to spend more and more time with my new found friends. Soon enough, I was one of the little hooligans laughing her head off, and arguing about the rules of playing foursquare or wall ball.

The next year, we all seemed to be so much older, which pleased me immensely. We were almost 5th graders, after all. We could start watching movies that our younger siblings couldn't. Sometimes, we could even watch PG-13 movies. One of my classmates even said they watched Friday the 13th with their parents, and that they had nightmares for weeks. It was an exhilarating time.

The big milestone of the year was the talk that all fourth graders get in June. We all acted as if we knew what it was, but really we were all clueless. As the week of the assembly where the talk would occur approached, it was all anyone could think about. We would jabber openly about the possibility of what it would entail, and as a teacher walked by, we would all hush instinctively. It was almost as if no one could know we anticipated this so much. My mind was consumed by it. The days began to blur together, and I all but forgot about my schoolwork. We read a book or two, but that was all I could tell anyone. I couldn't say what was for lunch that day; I couldn't remember the words for the spelling test that week. Things at home were hardly ever on my mind, other than my mom asking me daily how school was going, and I would give her the same answer: “It's fine.”

Then that long awaited day finally arrived. Friday, the 13th of June. Summer was just around the corner, but the entire 4th grade class could only think of this day. The girls and boys were separated as we walked down the hallway, one group heading toward a portable, the other toward the library. All the girls squished together between bookshelves, focused on the projection at the front of the room, reading *Just Around the Corner*. As the nurse began to talk, words like “menstruation”, “period” and “puberty” came into play.

A half an hour later, we all filed out of the library as the dismissal bell rang. The day was over, but we lingered for a moment to discuss the “life shattering” news. We all shivered jokingly, acting disgusted at what was just told to us. As I walked to the pick-up area to find my mom, my little brain was going a mile a minute. I remember being so disappointed that it hadn't lived up to

the hype. It was all just information about something that wouldn't happen to me for years. Years. All that waiting just to get a free sample deodorant, and a few feminine-hygiene products.

Feeling dejected, I searched and searched for my mom, but she wasn't there. As I grew worried, I laid eyes on my dad. I walked up to him, confused as to why he wasn't at work. He refused to answer any of my questions, simply stating that he would explain everything when we got home. My heart rate increased suddenly, a pit forming in my stomach. That 2 minute drive up the hill felt like it lasted hours. I couldn't figure out for the life of me what was the matter, but I worried that I did something wrong.

As soon as the truck pulled to a stop in our driveway, I fought every urge I had to bolt towards the front door and burst inside. The tension grew with every step I took towards our house. I threw my backpack down by the door, and headed toward the living room to wait for the harrowing news. His footsteps were heavy behind mine; weighed down with the sadness I could see leaking out of his eyes. I had never seen my dad cry before. I felt exposed, standing in the middle of the room, susceptible to his emotions. He breathed in deeply, and told me simply: "Ian has leukemia."

Everything from the past month suddenly came rushing back to me. In a way, my life flashed before my eyes. I suddenly remembered the book that we read in school, "A Thousand Paper Cranes". The main character in the novel was a victim of the Hiroshima bombings, and had leukemia. Immediately, I thought of the ending of the book: death.

I collapsed forward into my dad's strong, protecting arms, and I thought. I thought about the laughs that I had with my brother, all that I had learned from him. I thought about our weekly "Avatar – The Last Airbender" viewings, and our family camping trips. But mostly, I thought about our walks home from school together. For the past month, my brother had been complaining as we walked up the hill from school. It was steep, and pretty long, especially for a 2nd and 4th grader. His back was bothering him, and at first it was just a little bit of irritation. But as the weeks passed, he began to wince as we made it to the top. I thought he was just complaining, and doing his best to be the most annoying brother that he could. Boy was I wrong.

A few days prior to that Friday, he couldn't even get out of bed in the morning. He woke up crying at random times during the night. Not even pain medicine or chiropractor visits would help. My parents had spent weeks worrying, trying to figure out what was wrong with their son. At his last chiropractor appointment, the doctor saw how much pain he was in, and knew something was wrong. The next week, he was at the hospital for an MRI. The day after the results came in, he was hospitalized. He stayed there for a week, getting intense rounds of chemotherapy.

We packed bags that would be sufficient for an undefined length of stay. As my Dad called relatives, his face would twist into that of grief and despair. His pain, our pain, rippled through our friends and family as more and more people heard the news. Even my classmates heard the

news over the coming weeks, and I got a few phone calls from friends I hadn't spoken to in years. People came out of the woodwork to give their love and support, most of which was directed towards my brother. Most children don't understand why attention wouldn't be given to them at any point in time, or at least divided equally among siblings. This was a lesson quickly learned for me. I learned to accept the fact that my brother was going through an extremely trying ordeal, and I was just along for the ride.

That ride took us to the hospital, full of antiseptic that would sting my nose, crying children suffering immense pain, and the fluctuating temperature. We would spend the next three years driving down that stretch of highway, this building on a hilltop waiting for us at the end. Things were hard to comprehend, his condition deteriorated. Eventually, I stopped coming to the clinic visits with him. I knew that the chemotherapy would ultimately improve his condition, but it was so difficult to see him get worse before he got better.

The years passed, and my brother sprouted up about two feet. We were growing up quickly, and my brother was in remission. His skin wasn't quite as pale as it used to be. He had returned to his old, obnoxious self, as all little brothers are. I had grown to miss his sassy remarks, and the passion in his voice when he talked about history. His treatment had been over for about a year and a half, and I had just started high school. Life was just getting back to normal. Then Mom got a phone call.

My mother sensed the diagnosis a few weeks after the backaches had returned. After that, it was almost as if we had hopped back in time. The same phone calls were made. The same bags were packed. And for the next three years, the same road to the hospital was driven. It wasn't any easier with repetition, but our learning was amplified. Because I was older, it was so much easier to read the emotions of those around me.

Now every Friday the 13th leaves me to reminisce on the life that we could have had, and the life that we did have. Instead of being a day filled with grief, it is a day of remembrance. Cancer, for my family, was a double edged sword. Although it brought my brother immense pain and suffering, it exposed him—and the rest of us—to the good present in the world. It taught us strength, and sympathy. It taught me to be more aware of others, to care for them when they are in need. And most of all, it taught me much scarier things could happen on Friday the 13th than a visit from Jason and his chainsaw.

Hello, and Goodbye

Min Su Kim

‘안녕’ (pronounced Ahnyeong in English) means ‘hello’ in Korean. However, it also means goodbye. I never imagined that a goodbye at the end of Summer, 2010 would be the final goodbye that I would hear from my grandfather. My grandfather had lived through many horrifying, tough situations including the Second World War and Korean War. After having survived such terrifying times, he used his diligence and hard work to become a nationally recognized law professor.

My grandfather had always been the type of person to never give up, no matter how excruciatingly hard or painful the situation was. He fought to live each day for us, even when the doctors told us that he would not live to see another two months, or when his body began to slowly shut down because of pancreatic cancer. He stubbornly battled against the words of his doctor for his loving family. Yet, after one and a half years of miraculously fighting, the soldier that I had known as a grandfather lost his battle to cancer.

When one family member gets cancer, it's as if the whole family is infected by it. I would see my mother crying in a room, and trying her best to stifle her sobs in the pillows. My father would sit by her, unsure of how to help, or what to say. My mom's eyes would remain swollen for days and crying became part of her daily routine, although she tried to smile as if everything were fine. At the time, I did not understand the circumstances, and never knew that I would lose my grandfather.

There are many things I remember about my grandfather. I remember his house on the 16th floor of an old apartment building. Sometimes, the elevator would break down, and we would be forced to laugh and groan through many flights of stairs. Even worse, we'd often be carrying bags of groceries! I remember how he tried to teach me how to use chopsticks properly, though he eventually gave up. I remember how he sat me down sometimes to talk about serious world problems, such as poverty, because I wanted to follow in his paths to becoming a lawyer. Yet, the fondest memories that I have of my grandfather were in a single garden.

There was a garden a mile away from the house. Every week or so, my grandfather and I would walk that mile in blistering summer heat to walk around the expansive garden. We would always stop near the subway station for crackers to feed ourselves and the koi. I feel as if the garden was reflective of the times I had with my grandfather. There were many colorful flowers, the sun was bright, and my grandfather and I would always walk hand in hand down the long trails. All my memories were equally bright and beautiful, and full of the peaceful laziness that overtook me and my grandfather as we spent hours strolling the garden. Those walks slowly came to a halt, and by the end of the Summer, vanished.

I started to notice something was wrong when my grandfather was too tired to go to that garden. It was our special place, and he had never skipped the opportunity of a sunny day. Of course, he always apologized, and spent the day indoors with me. It was then that I noticed that he was constantly going to the hospital. He was getting sicker by each day, though he kept his smile on when I was around. He was exhausted, and had barely any strength left in him to fight back. I felt the depression that settled within our family as the days grew colder, and bleaker.

My mother remained in Korea for the next few months, in order to spend my grandfather's last months with him. I came back to the United States with my brother and father, and spent the passing Fall and Winter in worry of my family in Korea. I would receive emails from my mom to not worry and to take good care of my brother and dad in her absence. Because my dad had to go to work, my brother and I stayed in after school care until my dad came to pick us up. It was a day in December that my dad came rushing in to our school. With no words, he brought us to stores to pick out black clothing, as we owned none. When we got home, we were told to pack quickly, and to bring only essentials. I didn't understand until we boarded the morning plane the next day to Korea. My grandfather had passed away the night before.

My mom met us at the service. The minute she saw my dad, she broke into tears again. Her face had already been streaked with the ghosts of many tears, and the new tears were faint, as there were no more tears she could cry. I remember her saying, "I couldn't be with him at the moment he passed. No one was there with him. Not even the nurses." How could he have passed with such loneliness? My grandfather had lived through many hardships. Why did yet another one have to lead to his ending? What had he done wrong? He had always been health conscious, and had done everything to elongate his life by one more second, if possible. And yet, no matter how many questions I asked, there were no answers, and my grandfather was gone.

I do not believe that my grandfather should be remembered as a victim of pancreatic cancer. Cancer does not define a person. A person should be defined by his entire life, and how he impacted others. I define my grandfather as a hero, a well renowned professor, a guardian of a father, a sweet grandfather, and my role model. Although he did suffer from the pains of cancer, his identity was of a much stronger man who fought it for a miraculous amount of time. Even to the last second of his life, he never lost his dignity. Cancer took away a lot, but it did not take away everything.

Ahnyeong does not just mean hello, or goodbye. It's true meaning is 'take care.' I wish that my grandfather takes care and rests in peace. Ahnyeong, grandpa.

I Miss Thanksgiving

Reghan Thomas

Last year, as sang for the closing ceremonies of Whatcom County's Walk for Life, I listened to the stories of the survivors. "14-million survivors in the US," the keynote speaker said, and she was followed by survivors who told victorious stories about fighting, about survival, about family, and about community. The told stories about their different diagnoses -- how, often, it was just a random check-up, or a little bump that someone said, "Hey, you might want to check that out." 14-million people survived cancer, many on a whim, but how many fought against the advice, or never got the advice in the first place and lost a battle they never got the chance to fight?

I started thinking about my own family. I grew up in Seattle because my father's family is in Chicago, and he wants to be as far away as possible. I have a great family, and we do things a little differently. We don't have birthdays, we have Birth Weeks, where we celebrate each others' loves every day with something new. We don't have any family in the area, so we celebrate the 12 days of Christmas with a small present for each of the kids (baseball cards, make-up -- whatever we love). We go shopping on Christmas Eve, each of us buys their favorite meal, and, the next day, we stay in our pajamas all day -- playing games and eating our favorite food, like kings. Ask my parents why, and they will say "Because life needs more than a day for celebration."

In spite of it all, though, we have never had a Thanksgiving meal -- at least not a traditional one. My parents are fairly joyous people, but Thanksgiving, I discovered that night at the Walk for Life, is a fight for thankfulness. It was Thanksgiving where my Grandmother had her first breast cancer operation. Two years later, it was Thanksgiving where doctors decided they could not get the whole tumor in her brain that had spread throughout her body.

I did not know my grandma, and my dad is pretty quiet about her cancer, so he does not talk much about her at all because that seems to be all he remembers. She was raised, essentially, a sharecropper in North Carolina. Her father died, then she and her mother went to work in the tobacco fields in the 1950's; they slept in a shack; they lived and breathed tobacco and chemicals all day long. All my grandma's family died of cancer. For a long time, Johnson County North Carolina had the highest percentage of cancer per capita in America.

"All those speakers tonight survived because they had someone to look out for them," my dad said on the way home from the closing ceremonies. My grandma did not have anyone; divorced, three children, and unemployed and uninsured. "Bet those people tonight had insurance," he said -- and that was all he said. And he was right: they probably did. Just recently we had a Coaches Against Cancer Week at our school; everybody effected by cancer wore pink, and the night of

the big game, everyone who knew someone with cancer had to stand: almost the whole gym stood. That night, people donated almost \$10,000 to cancer research. That's what community does.

But, alone with three kids, my grandma had no community, no insurance, and, knowing the symptoms (because her mother had died of cancer 20 years before), and not wanting to face the reality, she waited too long to have hope. So, as for my grandma, I did not have direct contact, but I deal with cancer's ghost. My dad is a strong guy, but he does not watch tv shows about cancer, he gets screened for cancer every year, and he and his siblings make morbid jokes about their own deaths, talking about cancer like it is lurking around the corner. His mom was 43 when she died -- when he turned 40, his brother called and said, "What will you do with your next two years?"

Three years ago, the jokes stopped when their sister, the youngest sibling (who said good-bye to her mother at 9 years old) was diagnosed with Stage 3 Breast Cancer. She was so scared of looking at her brother's faces (she didn't want to mother the boys who did not have a mother), she didn't let her brothers come to see her. They all came to realize they did not know anything about cancer -- they blamed her for not getting checked ("How does something jump to Stage 3?"); they tried to coach her from far away, they called the medical examiner to get their mother's medical records, and they went to any doctor who could tell them anything. Step by step, they learned more, but they realized that they, like their mother, had joked about cancer, but never prepared themselves to deal with it better than she had -- and they all felt like they had abandoned each other. My dad paid to have her family come out for the holidays, "but not during Thanksgiving," he told them. "We do Christmas a lot better."

My aunt had insurance, she had a family, and she had a community around her, but the chemo and radiation put her on the verge of a mental breakdown: 37-years-old, no boobs, no hair, and she chose to fight (she ran a half marathon 9 months after being diagnosed), but she was determined to fight for her survival, and make up for the future she was not certain about. She became reckless, and she emotionally distant from her family. As a precaution, she had her ovaries removed after her breast cancer surgery, so she became menopausal at 38-years old; she was resentful; she felt cheated.

When my dad tried to step in, she stepped back; she wouldn't take his phone calls, she wouldn't bring her family out to see us any more (we "were perfect" and they didn't want to see that), and she disappeared for a while (she came back, but we still don't know where she went). For the past three years, we have lost contact with my aunt. She's home, her life has stabilized, and she's living life cancer free and happy (so we're told).

Last Thanksgiving some family friends tricked us into coming to their house for Thanksgiving Dinner -- they asked us, the kids, before they asked the parents. My dad fought it until the end; we ate, we had a good time. Then we got the the car to go:

"That was nice, wasn't it Dad?"

"Just like a remember it," he said. "Dark, gloomy, and shitty food."

"Grandma couldn't cook?" my brother asked.

"Not on her last Thanksgiving, she couldn't. The kids made it," he laughed, "and we almost poisoned ourselves."

"Is that why you hate it?" my mom said.

"No," he got quiet. "It's just the only day of the year I don't feel very thankful, and that pisses me off, which makes me even less thankful." He was quiet a minute: "But Christmas starts tomorrow."

So, to say I have direct contact with cancer is probably not completely true, but I have been impacted by it. Cancer eats alive everything that gets in its way: my grandmothers breasts and brains, my aunt's family, and my father's strength (and even a little of his happiness). I know I am spoiled to have so much and still want even more, but there is a hole in my Daddy's heart that cancer put there.

He does everything he can that his mother couldn't: he pays for extra life insurance, he pays for extra medical insurance, he watches what he eats, and he exercises like no other. He spends his whole year insuring that, should cancer come, life will have been lived the right way. He points us toward things that matter and tells us to use our gifts to make a difference -- that's how I wound up at Walk for Life.

But cancer is his enemy, and it's hard to live with an enemy you cannot see, that you wait for, and you're sure is coming back. It leaves his soul just slightly empty, and so we never fully have him because he never completely trusts the future.

But, someday, when I have my own family, I'm going to host Thanksgiving. I'm going to invite him and put him at the head of the table. I'm going to make him look at what his fight against cancer has given him: a legacy of people who know how to do things differently. Then he might realize that for all cancer has taken from him, he can be thankful that it also taught us all to live.

Lockless

Zoë Mertz

Sixth grade. Walking down the hallway of the school that still seems so big. Binder clutched close to my chest, maneuvering my way through the halls, trying not to get knocked over by dozens of kids twice my height. Bell ringing, hallway clearing. A late pass scrunched in my fist. I can breathe again.

Administrator looming like a hawk circling its prey. Her voice, dripping with sugary sweetness: “Now, hon, you know there’s no hats or hair coverings allowed on school grounds, except for religious purposes. You’re going to have to take it off.”

I will never forget the day I found out. My mother sat kitty-corner from me at our kitchen table, her grave face contrasting with the watery February sunlight streaming through the front windows. I don’t know where my younger siblings were. All I remember was her and me.

“It’s okay to be sad,” she said to me, her voice breaking. “Take the time to be sad now. But once you’re done being sad, I need you to pick yourself back up and be strong. We’re going to get through this.”

I buried my face in her shirt. She wrapped her arms around me, and I breathed in her sweet smell, like flowers and honey, and cried.

Tugging the scarf from my head. Letting it droop around my neck, limp and still. An approving nod. Turning my back, making my way through the hollow halls towards class.

A few weeks later, I rapped on the front door with my signature knock. My mother swung it open, a bright smile on her face.

“You’re home! How was school?” she asked, stepping aside to let me by.

“Fine,” I replied, dropping my bag on the rug by the door. “You cut your hair!”

“Do you like it?” she questioned. She fluffed it a bit. “I was going for the Emma-Watson-esque pixie kind of look.”

“It looks great!” I replied. “Super cute. What made you cut it?”

“Oh,” she said, her smile fading a little. “Short hair isn’t as noticeable when it starts to fall out.”

Entering the classroom, head down. Handing the pass to the teacher, who gives a soft smile. Sitting down next to a friend, who sees the scarf round my neck

The whispered question: “Isn’t that one of your mom’s headscarves around your neck? Why don’t you have it on?”

My little sister gripped my mother’s fingers tight, as my two brothers and I sat at her feet. It was a bit of a squeeze for six people, even in the master bathroom, but we managed.

“You ready?” my dad asked, raising the razor above her head. Her hair was already patchy. Better to shave it off in one go than wait for it to die slowly, she had said.

My mother gave a single nod in response. She gave my siblings and I a brave smile as the razor began to hum and the first of her beautiful, soft brown locks tumbled to the floor.

I couldn’t do it. Snatching the lock of hair from the cold tile floor of the bathroom, I fled.

Glancing up to be sure we weren’t scolded. My hushed reply: “Administration stopped me in the halls. Apparently the no-hats-in-school rule applies to headscarves as well.”

Her expression is outraged.

I came home one day to find my mother wrapped up in blankets. Her newly-bald head was concealed beneath a patterned scarf, wrapped like a little hat. Her face looked pale and sick.

“I’m sorry, baby,” she said, pulling the blanket a little tighter. “Chemo sucks. They gave me meds, but I still feel terrible. And I’m freezing.” She shut the door and collapsed onto the couch, her eyes closed.

Her special necklace, engraved with all our birth dates, jingled around my neck as I leaned over her. She wasn’t allowed to wear it during chemo, so she had given it to me for safekeeping. Wordlessly, I pressed a kiss to her cold cheek, and went to put away my backpack.

Sitting through the rest of the period, silently doing our work. My friend shooting me upset glances whenever I look up. Bell ringing, rustles of students packing up and reentering the rushing river of the halls.

Teacher coming over to where my friend and I dutifully organize our things. Her gentle voice, asking if anything was wrong. My friend, starting to speak; my hand, stopping her, though I give her a grateful glance. My shaky voice, spilling the whole story.

We weren’t alone. We had friends who brought us dinner, who drove my siblings and me to our activities, who took us out on the weekends so my mother could rest. We had family, who were always just a phone call away, who sent their love to us in the mail. My mother even found a website-builder that allowed her to create a page on which she could request what aid she needed of those who wish to assist. But it was still many long months of my mother feeling tired and sick and small. As the weeks stretched into months, her collection grew: soft, vibrant fabrics with which to cover her always-cold head. All four of us kids wore her kerchiefs, as though they were

just any other item of clothing, a sock, or a pair of jeans. I even wore one when testing for my junior black belt alongside my brother, the culmination of five years hard work. Even with all her own struggles, my mother was right there, cheering us on.

The teacher's patient listening. Her immediate response when I am done: "That is absolutely ridiculous. I'm sure she just didn't know the situation. You are absolutely allowed to wear that scarf in support of your mom. And I will be having a conversation with the main office about this." Her voice, trailing off as she mutters to herself; her caring wave, telling us we can go.

It's been four years now since that first diagnosis, almost to the day. My mom has been officially cancer-free for just about three of those years. She still sees her oncologist every few months, but the visits are now just a little nuisance, a ripple in the river of our busy lives. The words 'chemotherapy,' 'radiation,' 'non-Hodgkin's Lymphoma,' are now things of the past. Her hair has grown back, thin and brown, just as it was before. I like to braid it when I can, though like most of the women in our family, it's so thin that it's hardly worth trying. She is back to packing lunches and discussing novels, driving us to activities and cheering at sports games every weekend. Our year of headscarves and medication is done.

In a far corner of her closet, a pile of soft folded scarves sits, gathering dust.

Slipping back into the hallways, friend at my side. Waving as we part ways at the end of the hall. And as I head up the stairs to my next class, pulling my scarf back atop my head where it belongs, and holding my head up high.

Redefined.

Katherine Kolendich

My Dad died from cancer. That's my "tag line" when people ask me about him. Those words seem to come more naturally to me than most others, as I have had to say them countless times over the last couple years. They describe everything and nothing of what has happened in my life.

On a chilling day in September, after two years of hair loss, immeasurable pain, and too many rounds of chemotherapy to count, my dad's battle with cancer ended. A confusing and difficult time in my life began as I tried to navigate through life without a father. Everybody deals with grief differently and my way was to pretend like nothing had happened. I bottled up every emotion that I had and plastered a smile across my face, but deep down I knew that I would never be the same person as I used to be. I constantly revisited the last day I had spent with my dad. I had walked into the hospital room and found him lying on his bed; too weak to even open his eyes. I longingly reached for his hand, but the man on the bed was not the man that I knew- the one who had coached my soccer team and taught me how to walk. I was holding the hand of cancer.

One of the hardest things about losing a parent is feeling that nobody understands. Even worse is feeling different and seeing those differences every day. Nobody understood how father-daughter dances at school made me feel like an outcast and they never saw me cry myself to sleep at night because I knew my dad would never get to see me graduate or walk me down the aisle.

I had never been able to deal with the grief I had felt until one of my best friends lost her mom to cancer last year. I spent long nights with her, reminding her that her mom's cancer did not define her. Through our long talks and many tears I came to realize something myself: I had been trapped in letting grief define who I was. My grades had fallen, I was no longer happy, and I was not proud of who I was becoming. I knew that I was so much more than losing my dad and I had let my other important qualities fade. I was forced to confront the anger and sadness that had plagued my life for so many years. I finally understood that I had lost my child like innocence and began approaching my life with maturity and a realistic view on the world around me. I spent the next couple months dealing with the immaturities of ignoring my feelings and made a conscious decision to change my life.

At first with bitterness, now with acceptance, I realize that there is no promise of tomorrow. We are given such a small time, and we never know when that will run out. Helping my friend deal with her loss allowed me to see the world in a new light. The life and death of my dad are strong influences of who I am today, but now I do not let them define me. I am a strong believer that circumstances do not determine who we are; rather our reactions and responses to these situations shape us into the people we become. Due to my dad's death, I will never be the same. However, I have learned more about myself and who I want to be based on the example of his

life. I know that my dad would want me to be happy, and I would much rather honor my father than grieve his loss. He has ultimately inspired me to further my education and use it as a platform in my life to guide me into my future goal of becoming a pediatric oncology nurse. I know my dad is proud of me for pursuing my dreams, and he always remains in my mind, motivating me to reach for the stars.