Statistics show that everyday 43 kids are diagnosed with childhood cancer, on September 9, 2009 I was one of those kids. I had just started the 4th grade at a brand-new school, it was the second day and my teacher had assigned us the homework project to fill a bag full of items that introduce who we are to the class. I sat there waiting for my turn with my bag full of 'me' under my chair... unfortunately my name wasn't called to go that day and little did I or anyone else know that the next day and the many days following would find my bag full of 'me' to remain sitting there under my chair waiting for my return.

On that fall day, instead of introducing myself as the energetic, healthy, happy, athletic, sport loving brother and son that I was, I arrived at a hospital into a department that had 'Hem/Onc' hanging over the door. It didn't take me long to learn that I didn't want to be there and that I would do just about anything if I could leave and never come back - turns out that it would be the day that changed my life forever. Instead of learning how to write sentences, how to multiply numbers, enjoy recess with my friends, I learned that I had Leukemia. I learned what cancer was, what chemotherapy was and that in order for me to fight and have a chance at winning I would need to be admitted to the hospital to start treatment immediately and prepare for a bone marrow transplant as soon as a donor could be found.

I was sad, scared and angry that I couldn't be at home with my brother and go to school with my friends. I remember wanting so badly to be normal, but there I was in my hospital bed with nurses poking me with needles, having unexpected surgeries and procedures, wearing hospital gowns against my wishes, being forced to swallow pills that tasted horrible, having doctors talk about me like I wasn't there and hearing about the many things that could go wrong. I shared a room with a bald kid who sat in darkness and didn't talk to anyone.

I received a huge frog shaped balloon from my Grandma during the first few days of being in the hospital and I remember asking my family if they knew what frog stood for? They didn't, so I told them that it stood for 'Fully Rely On God'. To be honest I don't know where or when I learned this, but I had somewhere along my nine-year-old way and I am glad that I had. That big, frog balloon filled with helium soared over my bed for a long time reminding me of how to fight and where to turn when I got scared.

8 years ago, when cancer so rudely interrupted my life, I told myself that I wouldn't let cancer win and thankfully I am here today to tell you that it hasn't but it sure has tried. I have battled through two bone marrow transplants, a stem cell transplant, cutting edge immunotherapy, more chemotherapies and radiation treatments than I could even imagine counting and accumulated a year's worth of hospital stays. If I believed in statistics or even listened to them, I am sure they
would say that I should have died by now, but I chose and continue to choose hope, to choose faith and to keep putting one foot in front of the other even when the world around me seems bleak.

I remember when I relapsed the 4th time, my doctor told me that there was nothing more that he could do. It's hard to describe what hearing those words feels like and the silence that follows. Thankfully, he followed up with 'unless you want to consider a clinical trial they are doing in Philadelphia?' My Mom told him that we would go to the moon if we had to!

After being patient #22 on this cutting edge clinical trial, I was blessed with a complete remission for 9-months and my doctor asked me how it felt to be a pioneer. A Pioneer? I had to look the word up to make sure I understood what he was asking me. Turns out a pioneer is 'one who is first or among the earliest in any field of inquiry, enterprise, or progress: pioneers in cancer research.' My answer to the doctor's question is "Lucky! I feel lucky!"

I am taking the SAT this week and worried that colleges might not accept me if my score is too low. I am a Junior in high school now and thankful for 'normal' worries that life brings because I have learned that things really could be worse and are for many others. I am thankful for having this perspective. I hope that when I start applying to colleges that they can look beyond a few possible shortcomings they believe to see on paper and can instead see me for all I have to offer.

It's true that cancer has changed me, in fact, I could write a whole essay about the things that it has robbed from that bag full of 'me' back in 4th grade, but I would rather focus on what it has taught me. I've had to miss almost 4 years of school, but the life perspective I gained during those days away has helped prepare me to be a better person going forward all while still taking daily chemo pills and not knowing what tomorrow holds, but life is too short to let worry steal today.